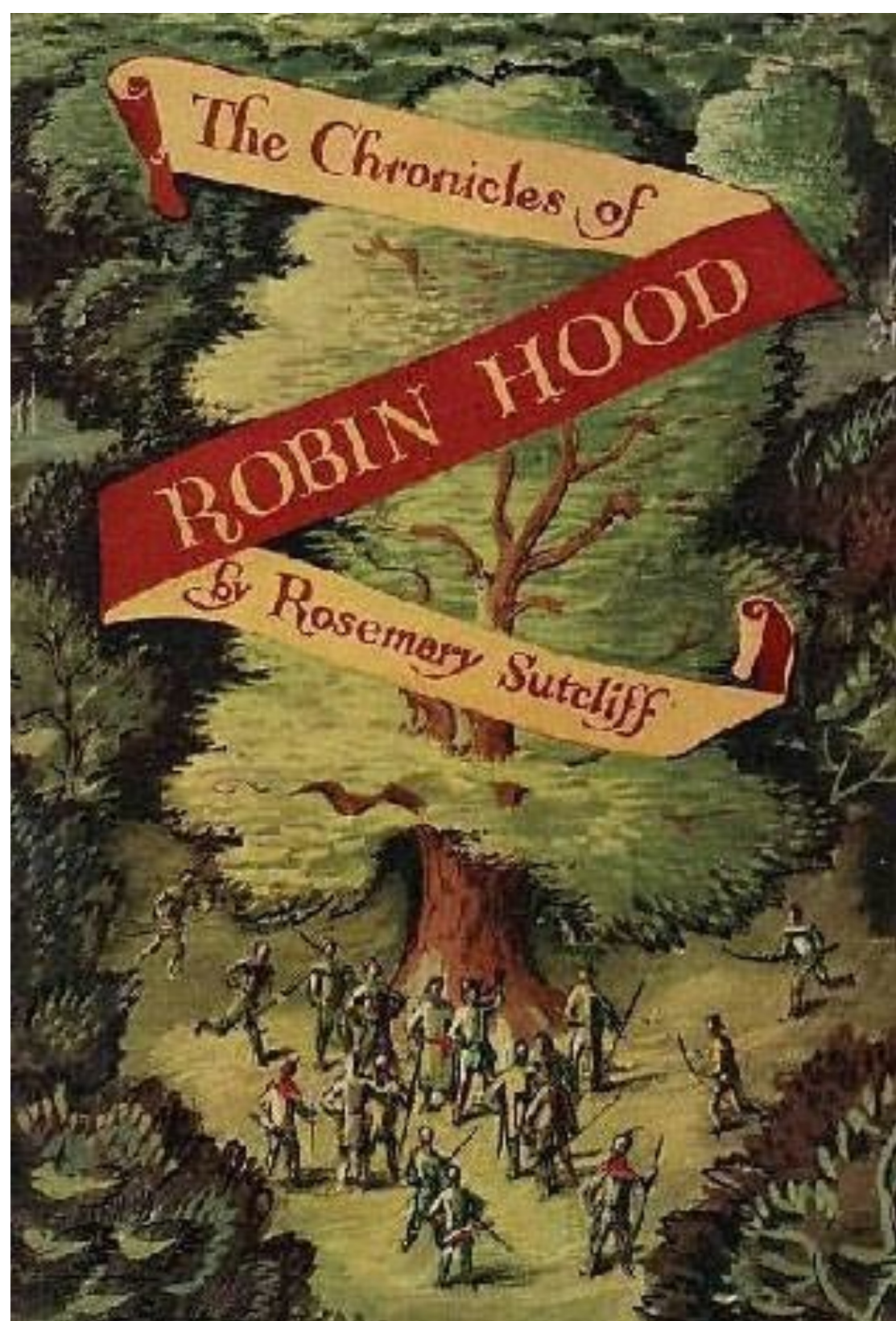




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Also by Rosemary Sutcliff

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About the Book

A classic tale of adventure and bravery charting the transformation of Robert of Locksley into Robin Hood, the outlaw of myth and legend.

Join Robin and his band of Merry Men as they battle injustice and seek to defeat the villainous Sheriff of Nottingham and Guy of Gisborne.

The Chronicles of
ROBIN HOOD

ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF

RHCP DIGITAL

How Robert of Locksley became Robin of Barnesdale

IT WAS HIGH summer in Barnesdale Forest, and the broad fans of the oak and chestnut trees were massed into thick layers of shade through which the sunshine splashed here and there in blots and dapplings of gold. The green deer-path which wandered northward through the trees was so narrow and faint that in places it all but disappeared beneath the undergrowth of hazel, dogwood, and wayfaring-trees; and where the tangle fell back a little, leaving a clear space, the rabbits who had their burrows beneath the roots of the forest trees were scampering and thumping on the open turf. The warm noontide hush was broken only by the hum of a myriad insects, and the distant calling of a cuckoo, and the soft whispers of sound as the wild things came and went about their own affairs.

But presently the peace of the forest was broken. A jay screamed in sudden warning, a squirrel darted up the trunk of a great beech tree, paused for a moment, chittering with rage as he peered down round one of the lower branches, and disappeared. The scampering rabbits were gone, with wildly bobbing scuts, into their holes, and the little track was left deserted; but not for long.

A man was coming between the boles of the trees, where none but the wild boar or the fallow doe with her fawns ever passed from year's end to year's end. On he came up the track, striding along as boldly as though he were a king's forester. But he was no forester, though his woollen tunic was of Lincoln green and he carried a seven-foot bow-stave in his hand. He was a tall man, slightly built, and seemingly about three-and-twenty years of age, with a thin, pleasant face, and eyes which seemed very blue against the berry-brownness of his skin. The hood of his green capuchin lay back on his shoulders and his dark hair curled crisply from beneath a close cap of velvet in which a curlew's wing-feather was stuck at a jaunty angle. His tunic was belted round the waist by a broad leathern girdle, in the right side of which was stuck a long Irish hunting dagger, and at his left hip hung a quiver with six grey goose-feathered deer-bolts.

Quietly he threaded the mazy woodland ways, neither dawdling nor making any attempt at speed. And behind him the rabbits stole from their burrows, the squirrel scampered down to the root of his tree, where he had left a nut, and the life of the forest went on again as though he had never passed that way; and before him as he went another screaming jay or clucking blackbird would cry its warning to the wilderness.

On and on he went, through darkling thickets where every shadow might be a lurking wolf, across wide sunlit clearings where the rose-purple spires of the foxgloves pointed toward the sky and the elder trees were curded with blossom. Once he made a wide half-circle to avoid startling a herd of roe-deer who were

feeding in a glade, and once he paused to cup the water of a little stream in his hands and drink, and again to follow with his eyes the bobbing flight of a green woodpecker. There were several hours of daylight left, and he was in no hurry; and as he loped along through the forest ways his thoughts were pleasantly divided between the village of Locksley, where he had been staying for two weeks, and his own farm, to which he was now returning. He and his forefathers had farmed Goddethorne for generations, holding it at a rental from the monks of St. Mary's Abbey at York; but he himself had spent much of his boyhood with his Uncle Stephen, who farmed his own land on the borders of Locksley Chase, and because of this he was generally called Robert of Locksley, though his native village was Birkencar, near Pomfret.

Robert of Locksley had been back to the village of his name for three reasons: firstly, on the business of the farm; secondly, to visit his uncle and the friends of his boyhood; and thirdly, to see Marian.

Marian was the daughter of Robert, Lord Fitzwater, of Malaset; whereas Robert of Locksley was only a yeoman, and not a rich one either, and he knew that he would never be allowed to marry her. But they loved each other, and had done so ever since they had first met in Locksley Chase, ten summers ago. She had been only nine years old then, and as she grew older it was Robert who had taught her to ride and to fly her hawk (and Robert, too, who had taught her to use sword and buckler, though the older folk had known nothing of that). And ever since he had come north to take on Goddethorne after his father's death, Robert—or Robin as he was often named—had returned to Locksley from time to time, walking the twenty miles through the forest and twenty miles back again, to see Marian and make sure that she had not forgotten him.

When he had left her that morning he had been sorry, because it would be a long time before he could be with her again, but with every mile that he drew nearer to Goddethorne his heart lightened because he was going home after a fortnight's absence. Hay harvest would be in full swing, he thought, and he began to make plans for having the corn-barn re-thatched, and to wonder whether, if he was very careful through the winter, he could afford to buy another yoke of oxen next spring. Sibby, the wife of one of his villeins, would have spread fresh rushes on the floor of his one-roomed farm-house, and there would be mutton-fat candles glimmering on the side chest, and something savoury for supper, and Trusty, the cattle-dog, would come barking across the fields to welcome him home.

It was evening when he crossed the Pomfret road and headed down-hill through the last tongue of Barnesdale Forest, towards Birkencar, and the warm rays of the setting sun slanted far between the tree trunks, sending long lances of hazy gold to mingle with the crowding shadows of the forest behind him.

Robert of Locksley quickened his pace as he reached the last home-stretch of the long tramp; but a little way from the forest verge he halted abruptly as a small brown-clad figure started out from the shadow of a tree beside the bank and came running up-hill towards him, gesturing him back towards the forest depths as it ran.

'Much, lad, is something wrong?' asked Robin, as the little man drew close; and received the breathless reply:

'Back, Master Robin! Get back to the forest while there is still time!'

‘And why, friend Much?’

‘Because you have been away too long. Guy of Gisborne has borne false witness against you while you were gone, swearing that you had shot the king’s deer. Only yesterday you were proclaimed outlaw and wolfshead from the steps of Pomfret Market Cross, and this morning the abbot’s cutthroats came, with Guy of Gisborne himself at their head, to take possession of Goddethorne; and they are there now, waiting for you to come back.’

‘And so you came to warn me?’ said Robin. ‘Good little Much’; and he put his hand gently on the shoulder of Much the miller’s son, and stood looking away past him to where the last rays of the sunset were dying out among the crowding tree trunks. He knew that the Abbot of St. Mary’s hated him because he had never scrupled to speak plainly his opinion of the fat churchman and his ways, and he knew also that the abbot had long coveted his little farm with its rich corn and pasture, desiring to add it to the abbey lands but unable to do so as long as he paid his rent—for it was the law that a socman could not have the land he rented taken from him so long as his rent was regularly paid, but was free to hold it himself and leave it to his son after him, just as he would if the land were his own. But an outlaw had no rights, and he, Robert of Locksley, would not be the first honest man whose life Guy of Gisborne, the abbot’s steward, had sworn away for his fat master’s gain.

‘Fool that I was to stay so long away,’ he said bitterly at last. ‘I suppose they swore that I had fled from justice? They did that to poor John Kierslake last year, as I remember.’ And he dropped his hand from Much’s shoulder, and demanded: ‘What has become of my villeins?’

‘They have been flogged, and now they lie bound hand and foot in the corn-barn, and to-morrow they go before the Justice in Doncaster, to lose their right hands because they tried to defend your property with stones and farm tools.’

‘Did they?’ said Robin, and his voice was very kind. ‘Good lads. Good, foolish, faithful lads.’ And he began to string his bow. ‘Are you coming with me?’ he asked, turning his face once more towards open country.

Much whipped round and scurried after him. ‘Master Robin, you’re never going down into that hornets’ nest? Do you not understand—?’

‘I understand that my poor villeins are in pain and peril because they kept faith with me,’ Robin said grimly. ‘So now I am going to keep faith with them.’ And he strode on, Much half-running to keep up with him.

As they passed the tree under which the little man had been hiding, he darted aside from the track and returned a moment later, carrying a strung bow and four long arrows which he stuck into his belt.

Robin glanced down at them with raised brows, and Much said in explanation: ‘I thought maybe you would let me go with you and be free in the Greenwood, for I am weary of living in bondage; and besides—two bows are better than one when there is fighting in the wind.’

Robin made no reply; he halted beside the trunk of a great ash tree on the forest verge, and leaned forward with one hand on the grey bark, and looked down into the bowl of the valley below him. From where he stood the waste land dropped away gently to the three great fields of Goddethorne, with the farm buildings in their midst, then rose again to Birkencar Village, which lay—its one long street and little squat church half hidden behind a spinney of birch and

rowan—half-way up the farther slope.

The farm was compact and self-contained and beautiful within its encircling quick-set hedge—a low hedge, because the law forbade any man holding land on the verge of a Royal forest to grow his hedges high enough to keep the does and their fawns out of the standing corn. One of the fields was down to roots; in the second the cut hay lay in long silvery swathes; in the third the wheat was tall, and green as jade. The farm steading, built in a square with no break save a gate of heavy weather-silvered timbers on the forest side, squatted close to the earth, round an open garth in the middle. Like the great mulberry tree behind it, it looked as though it had grown out of the land in the course of centuries; house-place and stable, cow-byres and corn-barn and cart-in-hay, walled with grey stone and roofed with warm brown bracken-thatch. The huts of the four farm villeins were brown-thatched too, and squatted very comfortably among their little bean-patches and herb-plots, between the farm and the forest.

Robin's eyes moved quickly over the peaceful scene, and his heart was sore, for he loved Goddethorne; but there was scant time for vain regrets. From his post on the forest verge he could look right down into the distant garth, and there he saw figures that moved idly about, and one that lounged before the door of the corn-barn.

‘Are they bolted in?’ he demanded, without looking round.

‘No,’ replied Much. ‘They are bound hand and foot, and the abbot's men have set a guard over them—or that was how it was when I came that way a few hours ago, and played the gaping half-wit for those devils' benefit!’ And he laughed quietly as he remembered how he had tricked the swaggering men-at-arms into thinking him a harmless poke-my-nose.

‘Good!’ said Robin. ‘That will make our task the lighter.’ And so saying he moved off with quick, soundless steps, along the woodshore towards a thicket of hazel and young trees which stretched down to the very boundary of the hay-field. And Much went after him, wondering as he had often done before at the uncanny silence and swiftness with which the tall man passed among the tangled wilderness of goat-willow, elder, and traveller's-joy without so much as the rustle of a leaf or the snap of a broken twig to mark his passing.

Only a few yards from where the thicket finally came to an end there rose an ancient thorn tree forming the end of a long hawthorn wind-break. Robin paused a moment among the hazel bushes, looking quickly from side to side; then he stepped out on to the open turf. Much sped after him like a small, faithful shadow, and a moment later the two were crouching in the dry ditch in the lee of the wind-break. They went down it, bent double, with the thick-leaved hawthorn hedge between them and the steading, to the place where a narrow gap in the wind-break gave access to the bean-patch beyond. Once among the tall, tendrilled bean-plants they were safe from observation, with cover right up to the wall of the linhay and the barn beside it.

There was a window high in the linhay wall. It was only a lancet window, made for defence, like the arrow-slits in the outer walls of the cow-byres and the farmhouse itself; but this particular window had been enlarged a little for some purpose long since forgotten, and although it was narrow, it was long. Robin had wriggled through it often in his boyhood days, and he was fairly sure that he could do so now. He pointed it out to Much in the fading light, and stooped

down.

‘Climb on to my shoulders,’ he whispered, ‘and I’ll raise you up so that you can get in.’

Much looked doubtfully up at the narrow window, but did as Robin bade him; and as soon as he was high enough he grasped the stone sill and drew himself up, and contrived to wriggle through into the hay-loft which formed the upper story of the linhay.

Robin handed up both bows, and then himself leaped for the sill. His hands gripped on the rough stones and his raw-hide shoes were soundless against the wall as he scrabbled for a well-remembered foothold and drew himself up. He had broadened more than he knew since last he came that way, and for one moment it seemed that he would not be able to force his way through; but he did it at last, sideways, with his head screwed down on his shoulder and one leg left behind, and pitched down head-foremost on to a pile of fodder inside. And as he picked himself up, he knew that no matter what happened he would not be able to retreat by the way he had come.

Much was kneeling against the wall, and Robin gestured to him to remain where he was; then, holding a loose truss of hay before his head, he began to worm his way forward towards the open end of the loft. Inch by inch he wriggled forward, until he could look down over the edge of the rough floor and see the whole farm garth below him. The dusk was rising between the old walls, and the saffron flicker of mingled fire- and candle-light showed warm and welcoming through the windows of the house-place.

Sounds of coarse revelry splurged forth from those windows, for Sir Guy of Gisborne and the abbot’s men were making themselves at home on Robin’s beef and home-brewed perry, and he frowned as he listened to the uproar. The fading light was just strong enough to show him the whipping-post which had been set up close to the gate, with the ropes still lying beside it, and the figure of a man-at-arms who lounged before the barn door—and Trusty. Trusty lay in the light of the house-place window, with his head twisted at an unnatural angle over a dark stain where his blood had soaked into the beaten earth.

Robin remained very still for a long time, looking at the body of his faithful friend, and it seemed to him that the death of his dog stood for all the injustice and oppression that was rife in the land. And his rage began to sing within him as an arrow sings in flight; he wanted to leap down into the garth and shout to the devils in his house to come out and fight; he wanted to kill every one of them as they had killed his dog. But he knew that he could not do that now; he was there to get his villeins away from the fate in store for them, and the abbot’s men would have to wait for another day. But as he began to worm his way back towards the rear of the linhay he swore in his heart that that day should come, and that henceforth his hand was against them and their kind, and the fat churchmen who were their masters, and the cruel lords who were as bad as the churchmen—because of the thing that they had done to Trusty and were doing to England.

A few moments later he was beside Much in the shadows, whispering his plan into the little man’s ear. For a short time they lay in silence, until the blue dusk at the open end of the linhay was deep enough to make it unlikely for any movement in the garth outside to catch the eye of the carousers in the house-

place. Then Robin reached out and touched his companion, and they began to creep forward.

The man outside the barn door was growing restive and wanted his supper. He kept on turning to look at the lighted windows, muttering angrily under his breath; and it was in one of these moments, when his back was turned, that Robin leaped down from his hiding-place. The man heard the soft thud of landing feet behind him, but before he could turn or cry out Robin was upon him. There was no struggle as Robin slipped the knife blade cleanly under his ribs, and the man-at-arms collapsed with a grunt.

Next moment Much had dropped both bows into the driest part of the midden, where they would make no clatter on landing, and leaped down to join him.

‘The barn door—quick! You have your knife!’ Robin hissed, and as the little man sped to raise the heavy latch, he picked up his bow from its resting-place, and, fitting an arrow to the string, turned to face the farm-house. If anyone should come out, the candle-lit window would silhouette them for a moment and give him a mark to shoot at.

Behind him in the darkness of the barn he heard a faint whisper and a groan, and then soft footsteps over the threshing floor; and it seemed to him that Much and the other villeins were making enough noise to rouse the half-mile-distant village itself. But there came no hush in the thick babble of voices beyond the lighted windows, and no figure appeared in the doorway. And now the four villeins were beside him, like shadows in the dusk, and Much was already running for the gate.

There was a tiny grating sound as the heavy bar was lifted and the bolts drawn back; but Robin did not turn his head. He was moving backwards towards the now open gate, with his eyes on the flickering golden window-squares that had so recently meant home to him, and his arrow still nocked to his bowstring. Then the tall gate-timbers were on either side of them, and the next moment they were all outside, and Much, aided by one of the other villeins, was silently closing the gate and jamming it with the bar, which he had thoughtfully brought out with him for the purpose.

A few moments later Robin spoke to his five followers crouching in the ditch beyond the wind-break. ‘Listen, lads. You all have bows hidden under your pallets. Oh yes, I know you have. Go and get them. Get any other tools or weapons you have in your huts—food—anything that might be of use to us. Be quick, and come back to me here.’ He detained one of the men as he rose in obedience. ‘Diccon, what of your wife?’

Diccon, the only married villein, said dully: ‘She has gone to her brother up t’village, Master. I did send her away yesterday when first we got news of you being outlawed.’

‘Good!’ Robin said. ‘Now go after your fellows—swiftly, lad.’ As the four figures sped away into the twilight he turned to Much, who crouched beside him in the ditch. ‘Much, my friend, an hour ago you said you would come to the Greenwood with me; but think, lad—there is still time; if you go back to your hut now, no one will think to connect you with this night’s work. For myself and my four farm-lads there is no way back, but for you the road is still open, if you take it in time.’

‘I will take no road back,’ said Much gruffly. ‘I will go with you to the Greenwood, Master Robin, if you’ll have me for your man.’

‘I will have you for my man, Much—very gladly,’ Robin said, and put out his hand to grip the other’s shoulder.

Silence fell between them. Robin was watching the low humps of the villeins’ huts in the gathering darkness, listening for any sound of discovery from the farmstead behind him. Once he and his little band had gained the shelter of the forest they would be safe, for no man-at-arms in all broad England could find Robert of Locksley in Barnesdale Forest—if he had no wish to be found. But between the villeins’ huts and the Greenwood there was a good space of open land, and he could not be content until it was crossed and the trees of the forest all about them. So he heaved a sigh of relief as a figure detached itself from the nearest hut and came running towards him through the dimmit. Another followed it, another, and another, and the desperate small band was complete again.

Then Robin rose silently to his feet and went back by the way that he had come earlier that evening, along the wind-break and up through the hazel thicket to the sheltering darkness of the forest; and at his heels stole five shadows, less silent than he, for they were less skilled in the ways of the wilderness that was now to be their home.

Behind them rose a sudden yell, and a thunder of blows against the timbers of the jammed gate. But the great trees were already between them and the open country, and the mazy fastnesses of the Greenwood closed about them.

Later that evening, in a clearing several miles from Goddethorne, in the very heart of Barnesdale Forest, the six men faced each other round a fire they had built of hastily-gathered branches. They had eaten a very scanty supper, for of the small amount of food that the villeins had been able to bring from their huts something must be set aside for the next day, and they were still hungry. They had left behind them the life and the fields that they and their forefathers had known for generations; the four farm villeins were dazed by the rush of the day’s events, and in pain from the brutal flogging they had received that morning; and they sat staring dumbly into the fire which lit their weary faces with a fitful golden radiance.

Much was taking stock of their possessions: six bows and two-and-twenty arrows (five of them clumsily made), three spare bow-strings, a reaping-hook, a leather bucket, a rusty sword, a wooden platter, two coils of hempen rope, an old brown cloak, his own and Robin’s hunting-knives, some pieces of bread, and a little coarse flour. Little enough, but it would suffice until they could come by more.

Robin sat with his hands locked round his updrawn knees, looking from one to another of his little band with a very kindly eye.

‘Lads,’ said he at last, ‘Diccon, Barnaby, Gurth, Watkin—thank you for trying to defend Goddethorne for me.’

Barnaby shook his head slowly. ‘Us did what us could, Master Robin—us and Trusty. But ’twas little enough us could do with sticks and stones ’gainst they devils. And they killed old Trusty.’ Barnaby was the cowman, and he had worked Trusty since the dog was a half-grown pup, and loved him almost as well as did Robin himself.

‘Aye, they killed old Trusty,’ Robin said, half under his breath; then he rose, and stood looking down at the five faces in the firelight. ‘It is the Greenwood for us now, lads. There is no place for us in the world of men any longer, and tomorrow you also will be outlaws and wolfsheds, with every man’s hand against you.’

There was a fierce muttering from the men around the fire, and Watkin, who was older than the rest, spoke for them. ‘Us don’t care for that, Master, if you will lead us.’

‘Lead you?’ cried Robin. ‘Then listen to me, lads, for if I am to lead you I will not have you become like the robbers who make honest men’s lives a terror. Firstly, you shall harm no woman, nor any man in woman’s company, for the sake of Mary the Mother of Our Lord. Secondly, you shall not rob or molest any poor man or honest yeoman who works for his bread as you and I have worked; nor any poor knight errant; nor any child. But against the rich merchants and the barons and pot-bellied churchmen who trample the weak beneath their feet and scoop the poor possessions of humble folk into their greedy pouches, you may do what you will. Thus, and thus only, will I be your leader. Men of the Greenwood, do you accept my terms?’ His voice had grown louder as he spoke, and his last words rang through the midnight forest like a challenge to oppression and injustice.

The men answered him gladly, fiercely: ‘We accept your terms, and we will have you for our leader, Robin of Barnesdale.’ They scrambled to their feet and came to him one by one; and there, kneeling beside the fire, each man set his hands between Robin’s in token of fealty and swore to be true to him and to each other, to the death if need be.

Afterwards they lay down around the fire and, being worn out with the day’s events, for the most part were soon asleep. But for a long time Robin lay wakeful on his back, staring up at the stars which sparkled here and there through the branches, and listening to the stealthy night-sounds of the forest, thinking about Goddethorne—and Trusty—and wondering very much what the future held for himself and his little band, and making plans for their betterment, until at last he too fell asleep.

How Robin met with Little John

SPRING HAD COME early to Barnesdale Forest. There were primroses in sheltered hollows, leaf-buds on the bare trees, hazel catkins scattering their golden pollen to the dancing winds; and on the topmost branch of a giant lime-tree which reared its head high above the other trees of the forest a blackbird was singing his heart out to the morning, shouting that winter was gone and the world turning green once more.

On the sloping hummock of turf between two great roots of the lime-tree sat Robin, with his back propped very comfortably against the trunk. He was fixing new leather straps to a buckler, but from time to time he glanced up at the men taking their ease in the wide glade before him. It was but nine months since he and his little company had taken to the Greenwood, but already their number had been increased from six to twenty by other villeins weary of their bondage or outlawed for such crimes as shooting the king's deer because they or those they loved were in want.

Robin had worked them hard to make them what they were; schooling them in the use of bow and quarterstaff, in sword and buckler play, and in all the hidden, nameless lessons of the forest and its ways. He had trained them well, knowing that their very lives depended on his training, and as his glance fell on first one burly figure and then another, he was well pleased with the result.

Each had been a hunted fugitive when he came to the Greenwood, miserable, ragged, hungry; but freedom and training, as well as good roast venison, had worked a powerful change in them, and now they were a goodly company of which any leader might be proud: stalwart of body, bright of eye, with the bearing of free men about them, each clad in tunic and hose of good Lincoln green cloth which they had obtained some time before from the pack-train of a rich merchant on the Lincoln to Doncaster road.

Robin finished his task, and, laying aside the buckler and outworn straps, he stretched until the muscles cracked behind his shoulders, and relaxed once more against the tree trunk. He was glad to be back in Barnesdale after the winter spent fifty miles to the south in the dry caves of Dunwold Scar in merry Sherwood; for much as he loved all the forest country, Barnesdale was nearest to his heart.

Idly his glance wandered over the glade where he had made his summer headquarters. The stabling for the outlaws' few horses had been built half underground, and showed no more than a raised turf knoll, its entrance well hidden among brambles and young trees. The rude wooden shelters and cabins which they had built to save themselves the cheerless business of sleeping in the open in wet weather, were bowered so deep among the trees at the edge of the

glade that a passer-by would scarce notice that they were there at all—not that passers-by were to be expected, here in the deep heart of Barnesdale Forest, where even the king's foresters did not come for fear of wolf or hobgoblin or the terrible phantom horse that was supposed to roam those glades.

A little stream ran down the centre of the glade, bridged in one place by a baulk of timber for convenience, though it was so narrow that the taller of the men could easily step across it; and among the young green rushes of the bank knelt Much and Diccon, who were cooks for the day, cleaning the cooking-pots by scouring them with sand in the running water.

In the centre of the glade burned the fire (cooking-fire by day, camp-fire when the sun had set), and the blue smoke from it rose like a great slim feather up into the spring sky above the tree-tops.

Four of the men were sitting on their heels in a square, playing knucklebones with much laughter; another sat by himself, mending a rent in his hood. Two more were engaged in deep discussion, jabbing at each other with their forefingers to give point to their words, and several, scattered about the glade, lay outstretched in the pale spring sunshine, simply being lazy. One of these, a man somewhat older than the rest, lay close beside Robin, with his hands behind his head, gazing up into the still bare twigs of the lime tree against the blue, and whistling lazily in imitation of the blackbird.

Presently Robin spoke to him. 'The larder is empty, Will, and it is your turn and mine to fill it.'

Will Stukely, or Will-the-Bowman, as he was often called, ceased his whistling and sat up. 'Aye, Master Robin,' he replied, and, getting to his feet, took his bow from its resting-place against the trunk of the lime tree. He moved with a certain trained stiffness that was quite unlike the loose-limbed ease of the others, for Will had been a man-at-arms in King Henry's army in his youth.

Robin also reached for his bowstave, and, getting up, set the butt against his foot; and bending the great stave, he slipped the bowstring into place. As though his rising had been a signal, a new alertness came over the men in the glade. The gambling party pouched their knucklebones; he who had been mending his hood rolled it into a ball and pitched it at the head of his nearest neighbour; one by one the lounging figures got to their feet. It was time to set about their daily tasks of the camp. Simon-the-Fletcher betook himself to his arrows; Ket-the-Smith to his little forest forge. There was firewood to be gathered, fodder for their few horses, and fresh fern for bedding. A little party under the orders of Much-the-Miller's son were arming themselves before going up to the Pomfret road, there to lie in wait for any traveller whom fate might deliver into their hands.

Robin and Will Stukely parted on the farther side of the little brook and went their separate ways—Will northward towards Pomfret, Robin south through the dense forest towards the wide glades of the Nottinghamshire border, which were generally rich in game. But to-day the deer seemed to have deserted their usual haunts, and, with all his hunter's skill, the only game Robin saw that day were a few fallow does with their long-legged fawns beside them, and these must of course be left unmolested.

Evening found him once again within a short distance of the Stane Ley, as the glade of the giant lime-tree was called. He was angry with himself for failing to produce meat for his men. He had been thinking of Marian, whom he had not

seen since he became an outlaw, and must never see again. Altogether he was not in the best of humours as he turned a corner in the narrow path he had been following and headed down towards a stream which ran chuckling over its speckled stones at the foot of a gentle slope. It was the same stream which, higher up its course, rippled down the Stane Ley, but here it was much broader and the path was carried across it by a narrow railless bridge, scarcely more than a single great beam.

He had reached the bridge and mounted upon it, and was already beginning to cross, when out from the thick hazel-scrub on the farther bank stepped a gigantic young man clad in the rough garments of a villein and carrying a quarterstaff, who leaped on to the bridge and came striding across it as though Robin had not been there at all.

Robin was annoyed by the man's truculent aspect and his want of courtesy in mounting the bridge when he himself was already upon it and had therefore the right-of-way. So he strode on, and the two met in the middle.

Robin was a tall man, but his head came only to this young giant's shoulder, and he had to tip his head back to look up at him, which annoyed him still further.

'Where are your manners, fellow?' he demanded haughtily. 'Could you not see that I had already mounted the bridge before you set your great platters of feet upon it?'

'Aye,' replied the giant, with good-humoured effrontery. 'But if it comes to manners, little man, where are yours?—The small should ever give way to the great!'

'You impudent lout!' cried Robin, who was now thoroughly angry. 'Out of my way, or you will regret it!'

The giant laughed tauntingly. 'Nay now, do you get out of *my* way, or *you* will regret it!' and he shook his quarterstaff.

Back a few feet leaped Robin, and bending his bow, nocked an arrow to the string.

The stranger looked at him for a few moments, consideringly, and then shook his head. 'You'll never let daylight into poor John Naylor, and him with only a quarterstaff for his defence? If this be Barnesdale courage, little man, I will get me back into Cumberland, where men fight fair in their quarrels!'

Robin knew that the man's words were just, and he lowered his bow at once. 'There is truth in what you say,' he said frankly, 'so I will lay aside my bow and get a staff to match yours from the hedge yonder. Wait for me here upon the bridge, and I will show you that Barnesdale men also fight fair in their quarrels!' And so saying he went back to the bank. Carefully he chose and cut a small ground-oak, and trimmed off its branches, while the giant upon the bridge stood leaning on his quarterstaff and watched him good-humouredly.

A few moments later Robin rejoined him, twirling the hedge-staff in his hand to test its balance. 'Now let us begin,' said he, 'and he who is first tipped into the stream shall be the loser.'

The other grinned. 'With all my heart. But I warn you, little master, *I* shall not be the first to cry "quarter".'

Robin laughed grimly as he brought up his staff, 'We will soon see if your deeds are as brave as your words!' said he.

So they fell to upon the narrow bridge, and a strange fight they made of it, though a fierce one, for every step they took backward or forward along those rail-less timbers was fraught with danger of a ducking, and the very force of their blows at times came near to tipping them off the bridge into the swift-running water below.

For a short while neither of them gained any advantage, for Robin was forced to admit that this great oaf was as quick as a cat when it came to quarterstaff play, while the stranger found that his opponent, though a head shorter than himself, was almost as strong, and had an even better sense of balance. But at last a blow from Robin's staff laid open the cheek of the stranger, who laughed and cried out: 'First blood to you, little man!' and instantly began to press forward, striving to bring the fight to an end.

Robin resisted fiercely and their staffs rattled together as though threshing corn—now to the left, now to the right, as cunning attack was met by cunning defence—defence which, in its turn, became attack. Backward and forward they moved on carefully planted feet, bright-eyed and grim, while the little torrent swirled beneath. Then the stranger's staff wavered out of line, Robin pressed in through his defence, and the next instant felt a stunning crack on the head. Something warm trickled down his forehead, and for a moment he all but lost his balance.

'Second blood to you, my friend!' he cried, and shook his head to clear the blood out of his eyes. He strove furiously to come at his opponent, but could not break down his whirling guard.

For a short while the fight waxed fast and furious. But Robin's head still rang from the blow, and suddenly he missed his footing. In a moment more he would have regained it, but a sweeping blow from the stranger's quarterstaff caught him off his balance and swept him cleanly from the bridge. He hit the water with a terrific splash, sending up lances of silver spray all round him, and instantly the current swept him away under the bridge towards a little outcrop of the bank some yards down-stream.

Alone on the bridge, the gigantic stranger looked about him with an air of mild surprise. He looked over the edge of the bridge on the side from which Robin had fallen, as though expecting to find him still bobbing up and down there despite the current, and, finding no sign of him, a worried frown came over the good fellow's face.

'Now by the powers, I did not mean to do him any real harm!' he muttered, and then, lifting up his voice: 'Ho there! Good lad!—Where are you?'

'I am here, safe and sound, though somewhat wet!' called a voice behind him, and, turning about on the narrow bridge, he beheld Robin, who had reached the bank, pulling himself out of the water. Instantly he made for the bank and went to the other's assistance, reaching down a long arm to aid him in his scramble up the steep over-hang.

'Well,' said Robin, laughing, and shaking himself like a dog, as he regained dry land, 'I have crossed the stream, though not by the bridge, but I shall have to go back again for my bow, which I have left on the farther side.' He put his hand to his head, and found, to his satisfaction, that the cold water had stopped the blood-flow. Turning to his late foe, who was dabbing at his broken cheek with a grubby neckerchief, he said: 'It seems very strange to me, that after being in

such violent haste to cross that you must fight rather than turn back for a few moments, you have turned back now of your own free will!’

‘Why, as to that, Master,’ answered the giant, rather forlornly, as it seemed to Robin, ‘I am bound for Nowhere-in-particular, and it does not much matter when I get there. It was only the breath of freedom working in me that caused me to act the fool just now.’

Robin looked at him shrewdly, his anger quite forgotten. He liked the look of the young giant: he liked his broad, honest face under the thatch of yellow hair, and his voice was kindly as he asked: ‘What did you say your name was?’

‘John Naylor. But men do call me John the Little.’

‘And what brings you into the heart of Barnesdale, John Naylor, out of your native Cumberland?’

For a moment John Naylor looked at Robin from under his brows, as though striving to make up his mind whether or not he was to be trusted. Then he smiled slowly and broadly.

‘Nothing but the wish to save my neck, Master. I be a poor villein, and my master had me flogged and set in the pillory for poaching his salmon. But I did not like the pillory, and so I broke the steward’s head—and came away.’

Robin threw back his head and shouted with laughter. ‘Well done, my young fighting-cock!’ he cried, and then added: ‘Are you hungry, John the Little?’

‘I be always hungry,’ replied John, simply.

‘Then you shall sup with me and my men—always supposing that there *is* supper for any of us this evening.’ And so saying, Robin set his lips to the bugle-horn which hung from his belt, and winded a strange broken call.

‘Tar-ran-tan-tra-trum-tran,’ sang the bugle-horn, waking the echoes far and wide and sending the small creatures of the forest scurrying for shelter in wild alarm; and almost before the last echoes had died out into the evening hush, green-clad men came starting out from the undergrowth to throng the bank of the stream. So swiftly and silently did they appear, that to the startled eyes of John Naylor they seemed to have sprung up out of the ground.

Will Stukely had returned from his hunting, and now came running to his master. ‘Master Robin, we heard the summons. What has happened?’

‘Nothing save that I have had a ducking and my head is broken,’ said Robin, laughing. ‘This good lad and I have had a bout of quarterstaff play, and he tipped me into the stream.’

An angry shout rose from the outlaws. Much-the-Miller’s son rushed straight at the stranger and skilfully tripped him up, and instantly the others were upon him, holding him down by the arms and legs, and struggle as he would, great John Naylor was powerless among so many.

‘What shall we do with him, Master Robin?’ asked Will Stukely, clinging round the big man’s neck. ‘Shall us duck him?’

Robin stood with his back against an alder tree, and laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks. ‘No, lads, let him go, for it was done in fair fight.’

The outlaws relaxed their hold, and John Naylor got up, cherishing a bruised elbow.

‘John,’ said the outlaw chief, turning to him, ‘I am Robin of Barnesdale, sometimes called Robin o’ the Hood, of whom you may have heard. These are my men—brave lads and true—and we live by reaving from the rich and

powerful; and what we can do to right the wrongs of humble folk, that we do. Will you join us, John Naylor?’

‘With all my heart!’ cried John, and, striding over to Robin, he held out an enormous hand. ‘I will be a loyal man to you all the days of my life, and here is my hand on it.’

Robin returned his hand-grip strongly, and turned towards his outlaw band. ‘Lads, here is a new brother, and if size counts for anything he should be worth two! His master set him in the pillory, but he had no liking for the pillory, so he broke the steward’s head and came away. And indeed I have a fellow feeling for that steward!’ A shout of laughter greeted his words. ‘His name is John Naylor,’ Robin went on, as their mirth abated, ‘but folks call him John the Little.’

The outlaws fairly roared their approval. They crowded round their new comrade, and Will Stukely reached up and smote him on the shoulder, crying: ‘His name shall be changed to Little John! We will baptize him in good brown ale, and I will stand his godfather!’

‘Aye!’ agreed Much. ‘And a sweet pretty babe he do be, to be sure!’

And so, amid a merry, jostling crowd, Little John was hustled off through the trees toward the Stane Ley, where the carcass of a fat buck was roasting beside the fire—for Will Stukely’s hunting had fared better than his master’s. And here, in an uproarious ceremony, he was baptized with his new name, by having a jack of ale poured over his head, and another down his throat.

So Little John joined the brotherhood of the Greenwood, and Robin gained a loyal follower and his best friend.

Robin, Will Scarlet, and the Curtel Friar

SUMMER CAME, AND the Stane Ley seemed full of the humming of brown velvet bees among the lime blossom. The blossom fell and the forest changed from green to gold, and it was autumn—the second autumn of Robin’s outlawry.

He had two-and-fifty men at his command now, for in the last few months the rule of St. Mary’s Benedictine monks had become harder even than of yore, and many a villein, swinking and sweating in the Manor Demesne while his own field strips went to rack and ruin, had bided his time until the chance came, and slipped away to join the men of the Greenwood; many an honest churl, burning under injustice, and freeman in danger of losing his freedom, followed suit. They were grim men, hot against the cruel overlords who had stripped them of all they held dear, and already the names of Robin Hood and his men had become household words from Clumber Forest northward to the very gates of York.

But not all Robin’s band had come to him as fugitives, for there was another way in which he sometimes gained recruits. Whenever he heard of a man who was a good fighter and honest of heart, he would seek him out, be he outlaw, freeman, or villein, and challenge him to fight, with sword or quarterstaff, or to a shooting match, and whether he won or whether he lost, Robin would offer him a place among his own men. In this way he had gained the loyal comradeship of George-a-Green, that valiant pound-keeper of Wakefield, who had vanquished him after a fight lasting two hours; and of Arthur-a-Bland, and William of Goldsborough; and in this way he was to gain many more in the years to come.

That autumn the outlaw band had moved far up through Barnesdale Forest and were encamped less than twenty miles from York. Soon they would go south again, across the Nottinghamshire border into Sherwood, to their winter quarters. But winter was as yet some way off, and the woods aflame with their October glory, and the York to Doncaster road was a good one, with much traffic of merchants and monks—and therefore yielded a rich harvest of gold and cloth, food and weapons, which would stand the outlaws in good stead through the lean months of winter when abbot and merchant alike kept to their own firesides.

One fine October morning Robin threaded his way along the maze of narrow deer-paths between Pomfret and Selby. He had no particular aim in view, for the larder was well filled and his pickets already posted among the chestnut trees beside the York road; but the frost in the air had set his blood a-dancing, as the rising sap does in the spring, and he had taken his bow and shot an arrow in the air, and, noting where it fell, had gone off in that direction to look for adventure, just as he had been wont to do when he was a boy.

The carpet of fallen leaves was frost-crisped underfoot, and the yet-unfallen leaves were golden overhead. The tangled bramble-domes were bowed down

with clusters of blue-black fruit among leaves that were purple and gold and crimson; and the air smelled bitter with frost. Blithe and merry was Robin as he strode along the woodland ways, but he went silently as usual, head up, and scanning the forest ahead and on either side for sign of anything that might promise adventure.

Presently, on the verge of a clearing, he halted. Just ahead of him, where the path led out from the trees into a tawny sea of bracken, stood a man. His back was turned to the outlaw, but Robin saw that he was young, and clad very point-device in garments that were ill suited to the forest: his tunic was of fine black cloth, and his long hose and the velvet cap upon his head were as scarlet as the vivid wild-rose hips that decked the briar bush beside him; yet the six-foot bow in his hand was a serviceable-looking weapon, and four long deer-bolts were thrust through his girdle. Very still he stood, watching the group of fallow deer who were feeding on the farther side of the glade some forty yards off, and on the shadows of the forest verge Robin stood as still as he, waiting to see what would happen.

For a long moment nothing moved in the autumn forest; then he of the scarlet cap drew a deer-bolt from his girdle and nocked it to his bowstring. And Robin, watching with interest, saw that he was a skilled Bowman, despite his popinjay appearance, for he laid his whole body to the bow, instead of drawing with his arm only, as is the way of the unskilled, and when he loosed the bolt he did so without plucking; nor did he strike his left forearm with the released bowstring. The deer-bolt hummed away across the clearing and struck a fat doe full in the breast. She ran a few paces and fell, while the rest of the herd fled for shelter in the forest.

Forth stepped Robin from the dun shadows of the trees and called blithely to the marksman: 'A fine shot, friend scarlet-cap!'

Instantly the man swung round, revealing a pleasant face with bright dark eyes and an arrogant mouth. His glance swept up and down the brown-clad figure of the outlaw (for when the leaves turned from green to brown in the autumn Robin and his men followed suit, changing their Lincoln green for warm hoods and tunics of russet) and his hand flew to snatch an arrow from his girdle.

Robin laughed, and stayed him with a gesture. 'I am no king's forester. Look at my cap; I wear no bugle-badger in it.'

'Who are you, then?'

'A free ranger of the forest, with free men at my back.'

'How if I distrust your word?' demanded the young man fiercely. 'How am I to know that you have not cut the silver badge from your cap in order to tran me? These men of yours—if I shoot now, can they be here before the bolt is in your heart?'

Robin shook his head. 'Softly, lad; do not play the fool. I also have my bow, and can loose as swiftly as you; and if by any chance you should slay me, it would not be long, I promise you, before my men would be on your track, and you would have as much chance of life as though there were a wolf-pack on your trail. If you are so eager to use your bow, let us shoot together at an agreed mark in friendly fashion.'

For a moment the young man hesitated; then he shrugged his shoulders and withdrew his hand from the arrow in his girdle. 'As you will.'

‘Then I will provide the prick and you shall make the garland,’ said Robin pleasantly. ‘Yonder red dogwood leaves should show up bravely against the peeled hazel.’

The young man went a little unwillingly to break off the dogwood spray, while Robin, going quickly aside into the forest, cut a long hazel wand. They met again on the narrow track, the one peeling the bark from his hazel-prick, the other twisting crimson dogwood leaves into a rough garland. Side by side they paced the agreed distance out into the clearing and set up the prick with the garland hanging from the top; side by side they returned to the briar bush from which they had started out.

‘Now,’ said Robin, ‘that was a fine shot of yours which brought down yon fallow doe. Do you think you can better it?’

‘I can try,’ answered the young man, and he seemed to have forgotten his distrust of his companion as he nocked the arrow to his string, and, bending the bow, took careful aim, and loosed. The arrow thrummed away to pass just outside the garland, and he shook his head ruefully as he stepped aside to give place to Robin.

The outlaw raised his bow, nocked his arrow, and loosed, scarcely seeming to take aim at all. The bolt passed within the garland, only two fingers’ breadth from the prick itself. Then it was the other’s turn again. This time he took even more care than before; but the arrow missed by a wider margin, and once more he gave place to Robin, whose own shaft this time grazed the top of the prick.

The third round remained, and the arrow which the stranger took from his girdle was the last he had. He stood turning it over in his fingers for a moment before nocking it to his bowstring. Then it hummed away over the tawny sea of bracken, to pass well within the garland. He heaved a little sigh of satisfaction as he gave place to Robin for the last time, and a moment later gave a sharp whistle of astonished admiration as the prick, fairly split by the outlaw’s last arrow, fell cleanly in two!

‘That was a shot worthy of Robin Hood himself!’ he exclaimed warmly, and turned to stare at his companion with a new attention; but Robin was unstringing his bow and seemed unconscious of his questioning look.

‘Why, you’re no mean archer yourself,’ Robin said at last. ‘We are both of us marksmen, you and I, and surely we should be friends also. Will you not tell me your name?’

The stranger was still watching his face very closely as he replied: ‘My name is Gamwell, and I was born and bred close to York.’

‘And what do you do here in Barnesdale Forest, Gamwell? And why do you shoot the king’s deer? For by the look of you I judge that you are no poor man’s son.’

‘I am no poor man’s son,’ answered Gamwell; ‘for my father owns broad acres between York and Fountains Dale. But I slew my father’s steward. I questioned the justice of his dealings with certain of the villeins, and we came to blows. I did not mean to kill him, but be that as it may, he is dead, and I have come to the Greenwood as my cousin Robert of Locksley came before me—and I shoot the king’s deer because I am hungry.’

Robin had stood very still while the other was speaking, watching him quietly yet eagerly. ‘Are you cousin to Robert of Locksley, then?’

‘My mother was his mother’s sister.’

For a moment Robin did not answer, then said he: ‘Robert of Locksley died on the day he was proclaimed wolfshhead; but your cousin, Robin of Barnesdale, bids you very welcome to the Greenwood!’

‘I guessed it!’ cried young Gamwell. ‘I guessed it when your arrow split the wand,’ and he thrust out his hand, which Robin took in a hard grip. For an instant the cousins looked at each other joyously above their clasped hands; and then said Robin: ‘This morning I shot an arrow in the air and followed it to seek adventure—and behold, I have found my cousin!’

‘And your cousin is very glad that you have found him,’ laughed Gamwell.

Robin gave his hand a final tightening grip that all but crushed his fingers to a pulp, and released him, saying: ‘Now let us find your shafts and mine, for well-balanced arrows have their worth in the wilderness.’

They moved off through the bracken, seeking the buried shafts; the last one Robin drew from the breast of the fallen doe. ‘I will send two of my lads with a game-stretcher for the carcass,’ he said a moment later as he rejoined his cousin; and the two of them strode off together in the direction of the outlaws’ camp.

They were still some distance from it when they beheld Little John seated on a fallen tree trunk with his bow across his knees—always when the little band was away from the security of the Stane Ley or the caves of Dunwold Scar a constant watch was kept on the approaches to the camp, and to-day it was Little John’s turn. He feigned to be much overcome by the brilliance of the stranger’s garments, shielding his eyes from their glory as though quite dazzled.

Gamwell flushed almost as scarlet as his stockings, under this pleasantry, but stood his ground manfully, until Robin cried out, laughing: ‘John, John! Cease plaguing the lad! He is cousin to me, and the only one I have, save for my cousin Ursula, who has been a nun in Kirklees Nunnery these five years and more. Make him welcome, John, for he is a new comrade of yours.’

‘Why, if he is kinsman to you, he is friend to me,’ said Little John; and he dealt Gamwell an open-palmed blow on the back that made him stagger. ‘Now I come to look at you, you have the look of a good fighting man, despite your hose!’ he admitted handsomely. ‘What is your name, good lad?’

Gamwell told him, and the huge outlaw shook his head. ‘No no, Gamwell will never do!’ he considered, remembering his own rebaptism. His gaze dropped to the stranger’s legs in search of inspiration, and across his face spread a broad smile. ‘Scarlet! We will call you Scarlet, in memory of your stockings!’ he announced, and held out an enormous hand in token of fellowship.

And Scarlet, or Will Scarlet, the new-corner became from that day forward.

* * * * *

A little while after this Robin called his band together and announced a day of sport and merry-making to celebrate the coming of his kinsman. During the daylight hours there were to be all manner of trials of skill, with prizes for the victors taken from Robin’s share of the treasure store; and at night there would be a feast.

The day dawned clear, crisp, and frosty; and brisk and blithe were the outlaws as they moved to and fro about the glade in which they were encamped, pacing

the distances for the archery butts and setting up the hazel-pricks and gaily coloured popinjays—straw targets they scorned. Many of them were laying wagers with each other as to the results of the long and high jumps, quarterstaff play, throwing the bar, and the five-mile race. Already, under the trees at one end of the glade, the cooks were hard at work preparing the great joints of venison and wild boar flesh, the pies and pasties and sugar-breads on which the whole band would feast that night.

The archery trials did not take place until late in the day, and only the most skilled among the marksmen took part; for the rest of the band, pleasantly tired after the strenuous day, and knowing that they had no chance of winning the fine quiver of arrows flighted with peacock feathers, which was the prize, preferred to lounge at their ease on the turf and offer helpful advice to the competitors.

Little John, Much-the-Miller's-Son, Will Scarlet, Will-the-Bowman, and some half-dozen more—these were the champions who now took up their stand at one end of the butts and began, each in turn, to shoot at the marks. They shot from two hundred, three hundred, and five hundred feet; and finally came the most difficult shot of all, in which the archer must turn round and loose within three seconds of his turning, at a mark whose distance from himself he must guess.

Robin stood with one shoulder propped against the trunk of an ash-tree, watching his men—eagerly, despite his lounging pose.

They shot well, all those sturdy brown-clad archers; but that evening Much-the-Miller's-Son shot best of them all—better even than Little John. His arrow was the last to fly humming down the glade, and it split the hazel-wand, just as Robin's shaft had done a few days before in his match with Scarlet. The little man grinned from ear to ear when he saw what he had done, and his comrades crowded round him, thumping him on the back, and loud with congratulations.

Into the merry group came Robin and laid his hand on his small henchman's shoulder. 'God's love on you, old fellow,' said he, softly. 'I would need to ride five hundred miles to find your match.'

Will Scarlet—brown-clad now, like the rest—looked round, smiling, and shook his head. 'Master Robin, have you never heard tell of the Curtel Friar of Fountains Dale?'

Now it was Robin's turn to shake his head. 'No, I have heard nothing of any such friar. Is he a marksman, then, despite his monkish habit?'

'That he is,' replied Scarlet. 'He could draw your seven-foot bow, or Little John's yonder, with ease, and hold his own with either of you at a shooting contest. I know him well by repute, for my father's land marches with that of Fountains Abbey.'

'Yet it seems strange to me that this champion should be a churchman,' Robin said consideringly.

And seeing his unbelief, Scarlet laughed. 'It is many years since Friar Tuck walked the cloisters of Fountains Abbey, for the brethren expelled him long since for his unruly conduct; and I have heard it said that he broke a pewter pot over the Prior's head and ducked the cellarer in the fish-pond, before he came away. Since then he has dwelt in a stronghold which he built for himself almost at the gates, for the brethren dare not drive him out.'

There was a roar of laughter from the listening men, and Ket-the-Smith said: 'Yet I have heard of this turbulent monk as a kind man to the poor. Is it not so,

Will Scarlet?’

Scarlet nodded. ‘Any villein of the dales around here will tell you that.’

Robin had been listening intently, his hand still on Much’s shoulder, and now he said: ‘To-morrow morning I will go and seek out this rebel friar, for ’tis in my mind that we need a chaplain.’

Next morning he set off, after bidding Little John and twenty of the outlaws to follow in an hour, and turned his face north-west towards Fountains Dale. He was mounted on one of the few horses they possessed, its hooves sinking noiselessly into the carpet of fallen leaves, the bridle-bit jingling gaily as he rode. He wore a shabby leather jerkin, a steel cap on his head, and carried sword and buckler, and the great red yew bow, from which he was never parted, was slung across his shoulders. He and his mount sniffed the bitter tang of the autumn morning together, and were in perfect harmony, for they had known each other for some time now and were good friends.

It was towards noon that Robin came at last towards the edge of the forest, and looking down through the trees, saw Fountains Dale lying lush and pleasant below him, with the gracious lines of the Abbey afar off among its golden trees and silver fish-ponds. He dismounted and tied his horse’s bridle to the low-hanging branch of an ancient thorn tree; and then, after fondling the animal’s arched neck for a moment, began to make his way down into the dale.

Once he thought he heard a distant hoof-beat behind him, and paused, looking back into the forest gloom and listening intently. He bethought him that Fountains Dale was uncomfortably near to York, and since he had come north into the territory of his old enemy the Abbot of St. Mary’s he had been very much on his guard. But the sound did not come again, and Robin went on, dropping steadily downhill through the usual outcrop of the forest—hazel and rowan, crack-willow and wild fruit-trees—until he came to the verge of the lush green valley-floor, and here he paused to look about him.

A short way in front of him, across a broad strip of open turf, ran a slow, peaceful stream, reflecting in its silver heart the alders and brown-tipped rushes through which it flowed. A little distance upstream, between the water and the forest, was a small, strong-seeming house of weatherworn timbers. It was obviously built for defence, for there was a stockade around it, which had taken root and sent out living twigs, and its walls were pierced with arrow-slits; and Robin thought that this must be the forest stronghold he was seeking. He began to make his way upstream towards it, and as he rounded a great tangle of scrub matted together with old-man’s-beard, he came upon the friar himself.

A man of gigantic stature was the Curtel Friar, clad in the rough homespun habit of his order, and he sat with his elbow on his knees and his chin in his hands, gazing down thoughtfully into the water which flowed, just there, over a stone-paved ford.

Robin smiled to himself, and resolved to try the mettle of this huge, thoughtful man; and he drew his dagger from his belt. On silent feet he moved nearer over the soft turf, and brought his hand down on the bowed shoulder of the monk, who looked up with a start, revealing a large, guileless face and a pair of mild blue eyes. Robin bent over him, holding the point of his dagger to his throat.

‘Good day to you, Holy Father,’ said he. ‘I am minded to cross this stream, and I am minded to cross dry shod; so you shall carry me over on your back—

it's broad enough!

The friar smiled affably. 'Friend,' said he, 'take that bodkin of yours from my throat, and I will most willingly carry you across the stream.' And as Robin withdrew the dagger, he got slowly to his feet, and kilting up the skirts of his habit, stooped down, presenting a broad back on to which Robin at once climbed.

Docile as any beast of burden, the great monk stepped down into the water, and made his way across the ford through the slow-flowing current towards the farther bank. Patiently he stood for the outlaw to slip from his back. But the moment his feet touched the ground, Robin felt himself caught in an iron grasp and flung forward on to his face. He wrenched himself round, and found himself staring up into the broadly smiling face of the friar, who was half-kneeling on top of him.

'Nay, lad,' said the friar. 'It is no use struggling, for you are not yet come to your full strength. So now you shall carry *me* back across the stream.'

Panting with his efforts to free himself, Robin glared up into the other's face, but the friar's knee on his chest held him down and he was powerless in the grip of the huge hands pinioning his arms.

'I will do it,' he said at last, 'seeing that I have no choice in the matter.'

The friar nodded and, getting up, stood watching while Robin scrambled to his feet and in his turn proffered his back. Then the huge man climbed upon it and settled himself very comfortably; and Robin, bowed down under the terrific weight, stepped into the water. He owned to himself, with wry amusement, that he had underrated the great friar he now carried on his back, but deep in his heart he swore that he would get the better of the encounter.

He carried his burden steadily across the ford to the opposite bank and set him down gently on the turf; then, with a lightning movement, tripped his legs from under him, and next moment was crouching over him with the dagger at his throat again.

'Now,' said Robin grimly, 'you shall carry me back again, you great loblolly, and if you trick me again—you will regret the day you met with Robin Hood!'

The friar smiled gently, and as soon as Robin stood aside, rose to his feet once more, and again proffered his broad back. As docilely as before he stepped down on to the paved ford. But in midstream he checked abruptly, and with a sudden twist shook Robin from his back into the water. Down went Robin with a slithering splash, but in an instant he was afoot again, and had closed with Friar Tuck. Thigh-deep in the icy water they reeled to and fro, smiting blindly at each other, until Robin missed his footing on the narrow ford, and the silvery flood closed over his head.

He came up spluttering and struck out for the nearest bank, where an overhanging willow tree offered a handhold. Here he scrambled out, and swinging his buckler from its place behind his shoulder, drew his broadsword and turned to meet his antagonist. But the friar had disappeared.

A moment later he reappeared from behind a great oak tree, also carrying sword and buckler. Then Robin slipped his great bow from his shoulders, so that it should not be harmed in the fight, and laying it down, advanced gaily upon the gigantic monk, who stood waiting for him, smiling, and with the light of battle in his eye.

There, on the smooth turf between the forest and the stream, they fought, grimly yet joyously, each taking pleasure in his own skill and the skill of the other. They fought buckler to buckler, trying every trick in their possession, aiming at the head or foot or shoulder, thrusting at the body, feinting, and falsifying their blows; and they fought in silence, save for the quick, soft padding of their feet and the ringing of their blades.

The fight was at its fiercest, and the bright blades, clashing together, were filling the frosty air with their shrill clamour, while the sparks flew up from the steel after every stroke; when suddenly there came to their ears the shrill neighing of a horse in the woods above. Both men lowered their blades at once and stood listening. Faintly they heard the jinkety-jink of harness from the forest depths; and they looked at one another, their enmity quite forgotten.

‘It was my horse that neighed,’ said Robin.

‘And there are armed men in the woodshore,’ answered the friar grimly. ‘Get your bow, Robin Hood, for I think you will need it sorely before long.’

Robin slid his sword home with a rattle into its sheath, and, running to where his bow lay upon the grass, strung it swiftly and turned to follow his enemy, who was now his friend. He could hear the sounds of armed men crashing through the undergrowth, and there was no time to reach the little house, which two men could have held against an army. They gained a small raised knoll, set in a loop of the stream, and turned to face their attackers.

Raising his bugle-horn to his lips, Robin winded a blast which he knew would reach his men if they were within a mile of him. If they were not, it remained only for him to sell his life dearly; there were eight clothyard shafts in his quiver, and his keen blade at his side. But for the friar, standing with drawn sword beside him, it was quite another matter; there was no call upon him to risk his life, and as the first of the well-known yellow-crossed surcoats of St. Mary’s Abbey’s men-at-arms showed between the trees, Robin spoke quickly to his companion.

‘Get back to the house, friend. These men have come for me, not for you, and there is no call upon you to risk your life for a stranger.’

Friar Tuck gave a short laugh. ‘I have always loved a good fight, and I never yet turned my back upon one!’ And putting his fingers to his mouth he gave a shrill, long-drawn whistle, thrice repeated.

As the first of the foresters and men-at-arms came leaping out from the woodshore, Robin was aware of a flood of shadowy bodies that swept past the little knoll, and glancing down, he beheld ten or more great ban-dogs with hackles raised and deadly purpose in every flowing line of their grey bodies as they headed at a gallop towards the approaching men.

Then Robin laughed exultantly, drew the bowstring to his ear, and loosed. The clothyard shaft took the captain of the abbot’s cut-throats in the breast, and he flung wide his arms and dropped. The rest checked for a moment, and then came on, boldly enough; and Robin nocked another arrow to his string. He judged that there were about a dozen men in the ranks of his enemies, and his eyes narrowed as he picked out a certain tall blackguard in a buff jerkin and chain-mail coif, who seemed to be in some authority. Guy of Gisborne!

The abbot’s steward had been in disgrace with his master since Robin’s escape, and there were few things he desired so much in this world as he desired

to revenge himself on the man who had caused him to be disgraced.

‘So it is a time for wiping out old scores, is it?’ muttered Robin, and took deliberate aim; but before his shaft found its mark the wave of hounds had hurled itself against the men-at-arms. The men fought grimly with sword and dagger against the terrible and unexpected enemy, and ever and anon Robin’s shafts hummed into their midst. Yet they were no cowards, and slowly they were fighting their way towards the two who stood at bay upon the little knoll.

Three of the men-at-arms lay still upon the turf, but Guy of Gisborne was not among them. Robin’s arrow had missed his heart, and he still pressed on, with the shaft sticking in his left shoulder.

The attackers were now only a few yards away, and several of Friar Tuck’s ban-dogs had fought their last fight. Then Robin tossed down his now useless bow and drew his sword. Seeing that the dreaded arrows were no longer to be feared, the men-at-arms set up a shout and came on at increased speed.

But in that instant their shout was answered by another, and down from the woods at Robin’s right hand came running a score of brown-clad figures, knocking their arrows to their bowstrings as they ran; and at their head was a gigantic man who seemed, to the startled eyes of the men-at-arms, to be as tall as a tree. The abbot’s henchmen looked from this new menace to the two men who awaited their coming upon the knoll. They wavered, and looked back at the advancing outlaws.

Then they ran. Guy of Gisborne was the last to turn: ashen faced, and with blood trickling crimson from the wound in his shoulder, he cast one glance, dark with hatred, at Robin, then he too turned and ran, swaying a little in his tracks.

The hounds raced, baying and slaving, at their heels, and the men of the Greenwood swept yelling after them. In a few moments the forest had swallowed hunters and hunted alike.

Alone on the knoll, Robin and Friar Tuck looked at each other, breathing quickly, while the noise of the pursuit grew fainter and died away. Then Robin stooped for his bow and, with the huge friar beside him, made his way down to the level ground. Three dead men lay on the trampled turf. Friar Tuck passed them without a glance, and halting beside the outstretched body of a dead hound, bent to stroke the shaggy head; and Robin was surprised to see how gentle his big hand had become.

‘Good hunting, old Gelert,’ he said softly; ‘and you too, Beaufort and Cavell. Good hunting among the stars. You were faithful friends.’ Then he straightened up and turned to Robin. ‘You are a costly man to befriend, Master Outlaw.’

Robin stood looking down at the dead hounds. Suddenly he remembered Trusty, and his heart was sore.

‘I am sorry,’ he said. ‘I also have grieved for a slain hound in my time’; and impulsively he held out his hand, which Friar Tuck caught and wrung in token of friendship.

There came a rustle among the trees, and the friar, after listening an instant, whistled again. He was answered by a sharp, excited bark. Next moment seven hounds came loping out from the undergrowth. They ran to their master and thrust their great savage heads against him. He called them by name, greeting and praising them while he rubbed one after another behind the ears and fondled their thrusting muzzles.

‘So-ho! Luath! So-ho! Levin! That was brave work, Bran and Orthros. Sweff, sweff, little brothers!’

He was still making much of them, and Robin was standing by, watching with a half smile, when once again the outlaws issued from the forest. Little John came striding to his leader, breathless and laughing.

‘We have seen the abbot’s pack well on the way to York, Master. They will scarce stop running this side of the city gates, I’ll warrant me,’ he said; ‘and they have left their horses behind them.’

‘That is brave news,’ said Robin; ‘for we have need of horses!’ He looked round his band proudly, and then turned to the huge monk. ‘Friar Tuck, I have heard of you, that you are a just and kindly man, and to-day I have found you a brave one. Now it is in my mind that we need a chaplain, my lads and I. Will you come to us, then, and say the daily mass, and the high mass on holy days?’

‘I will come,’ replied Friar Tuck. ‘I will come gladly, for I have heard of you also, for a good friend to the poor and oppressed, and an enemy to the overfed prelates and brutal lords, who are my enemies too.’

Little John came to him, with huge hand outstretched; Much, Scarlet, and Will-the-Bowman followed, and the rest of the band crowded round, while the gigantic monk turned from one to another of his new friends, returning their ready handclasps, his placid face alight with pleasure in their fellowship—for despite his solitary ways he was a man who loved his fellow men.

So it was that when the outlaw band marched into camp that night Friar Tuck strode in their midst, with his habit kilted up to his knees, his buckler at his back, and the seven great hounds padding along beside him.

How Robin Hood befriended a Knight

LIKE MOST PEOPLE who live close to the earth, Robin and his band were used to eating only twice in the day—in the morning before the day's work began, and again in the evening, after it was done. But to-day was midsummer, the feast of St. John the Baptist, when all the country folk held high festival and Robin decreed a holiday for his men. So, at the far end of the Stane Ley, the cooks were tending a midday meal which was already beginning to send out a savoury smell of broiled venison and new bread and river trout. And dotted about the open turf, passing the time as best pleased them, the outlaws waited for their dinner.

It was very hot in the glade, though the shadows lay black and cool beneath the trees that rimmed it round, and the friar's dogs lay sprawled out among the outlaws, sleeping, or snapping at the midges that hovered up and down in the sunshine.

'Dinner smells good!' said Little John, lounging against the silver trunk of a beech tree. He thrust out a foot and poked idly with his toe at Will Scarlet, who lay on his stomach, half in shade and half in sunshine, rubbing Orthros behind the ears; and Scarlet raised his head and sniffed loudly.

Much, sitting cross-legged beside him (for the three were seldom apart), looked up from the piece of harness he was mending. 'Blessings upon St. John,' said he, 'I am hungry already.'

Little John laughed; and a companionable silence fell between them, until Robin came across the glade from the stables and joined them. He stood for a few moments, looking out from the shade of the tree, across the sunlit turf. Then he gave a small chuckle.

'Did ever you see revellers taking their pleasures so peacefully?' said he. 'Hob mends his tattered hose, Diccon whistles between his teeth, Red Hugh and Barnaby would seem to be setting the world to rights, judging by their solemn faces; Will Stukely whittles a stick. The rest of you sleep in the sunshine—you do not even snap at flies, like the good friar's hounds!' He considered a while, then dropped his hand from Little John's shoulder: 'I have it! We need a guest, to wake us up!'

'Where shall we find our guest, Master?' asked Little John.

'Go up through the willow plantation, to Irming Street, the three of you,' Robin said quickly. 'Many come and go along that road, and assuredly our guest will fall into your hands before long. When you have him, bring him to me—be he knight, monk, or yeoman—and we will make merry in his honour, and at his expense, if his coffers are well lined!'

So the three took up their bows and slipped away into the forest; and behind them the glade settled back into its noontide peace.

They went swiftly eastward, by deer-paths that were as well known to them as the lines on their own palms, until they came at last up through the willows to the ancient paved way that ran north through the forest, straight as an arrow to the gates of York. Just here, three roads ran into the Irming Street, and the high ground gave them a wide view over the country-side. They looked north-west into the great hollow of Barnesdale, and saw the roads empty of life. North they looked, and east towards the sea, with no better result; but when they looked far to the south, along the road that led from Doncaster, they beheld a mounted figure, small with distance as an ant, coming slowly towards them.

‘There rides our guest,’ said Little John. ‘Much, your eyes be like a hawk’s; what kind of man is he? Knight or churchman?’

Much shaded his eyes from the sun with his hand, gazing away and away down the long white ribbon of the road; then he shook his head. ‘He is too far off as yet; but I think—I catch the glint of mail in the sunshine.’

‘Ah well,’ said Will Scarlet, with a laugh; ‘he will be up with us soon enough, and whatever his kind, he is our diner.’

They settled themselves in the dry ditch below the willows to wait. Before long they heard the clip-clop of a horse’s hooves approaching, and, looking southward between the trees, they beheld a knight on a tall white horse riding towards them. He rode with his chin sunk on his breast and dejection in every line of his drooping figure. One stirrup swung free, slapping against his mailed foot, and the bridle hung loosely from his lax hand. It seemed that he rode with no eye for the June-tide forest, nor ear for the distant cuckoo; and so sunk was he in his own unhappiness that he never saw the three figures beside the road until Little John had stepped forward and caught his bridle. Then he roused himself with a start and his hand flew towards his sword hilt.

Little John looked up into the pleasant, tired face of the knight, and shook his head. ‘Nay, Sir Knight, there be no need to draw your sword, for we three are honest rangers of the forest, sent by our master to bid you dine with him to-day.’

‘And who is your master?’ asked the knight, still with his hand on the hilt of his sword.

‘His name is Robin Hood—Robin of Barnesdale some folks call him—and he is lord of these parts.’

Then the knight’s weary face lit into a smile. ‘I had meant to press on into Selby before breaking my fast,’ he said, ‘but if your master is Robin Hood I shall be very glad to dine with him, for I have heard much of him and I have long desired to meet so gallant an outlaw.’ And he turned his horse from the track, in among the trees, in obedience to the wood-ranger’s hand on the bridle.

So they took to the forest: the three outlaws and the knight, Little John walking with his hand on the horse’s bridle and the other two bringing up the rear; and as they went, the knight was very silent and his face was drawn and sad in the shadow of his mail coif.

When they reached the Stane Ley their appearance was greeted by a shout of welcome, for the outlaws were becoming very hungry and the cooks were at their wits’ end to keep the dinner from spoiling.

As the knight slid heavily from the saddle, Robin came with courteously doffed bonnet to bid him welcome, and led him across the turf to the cool shade of the trysting lime, where Friar Tuck waited to say the customary mass.

Kneeling reverently in a wide half-circle about the gigantic monk, the outlaw brotherhood heard mass, and when it was over, all sat down to the feast which was now prepared.

Robin sat in his own place between the spreading roots of the lime tree—the place that had become both throne and council seat—with his guest beside him. The knight looked with wonder at the rich food, but Robin noticed that he ate very little, seeming to have no appetite, though he looked hungry enough, and though his armour was well cared for, his surcoat was woefully shabby.

So while Robin played the courteous host, he thought very deeply, and watched his guest, and thought again. At last, when the knight had given up all pretence of eating, and washed his fingers in the bowl which Little John held for him, he said: ‘Now, Sir Knight, I must trouble you for payment, for it is not right that a yeoman should pay for a knight’s meal.’

The knight looked up quickly and his thin cheek flushed crimson. ‘Alas!’ he exclaimed, spreading his hands; ‘I have but ten shillings in the world; but if that will cover the cost of my meal, you are very welcome to it. It is in the coffer, yonder at my saddle-bow.’

Robin nodded to Little John, who went to the knight’s horse, which was tethered nearby, and taking the coffer from its place, tipped the contents into his palm. There were ten silver shillings, neither more nor less, and he counted them slowly in his hand, while the knight watched him with shame in his eyes.

‘Our guest spoke the truth,’ said Little John. ‘What shall I do with the money, Master?’

‘Put it back where it came from, lad,’ said Robin with a smile, and turning to his companion, he laid a hand on his bowed shoulder and said kindly: ‘I ask your pardon for seeming to doubt your word, Sir Knight. But I think you are sick at heart, for you have scarcely eaten and there is trouble in your eyes. Will you not tell me the cause of your distress, for it may be that I can help you?’

‘That you can help me, I doubt,’ said the knight quietly. ‘But if it interests you, I will tell you the cause of my distress. It is simply this: a few months ago I had four hundred pounds saved, and broad lands at Linden Lea, hard by Nottingham; and to-day I have nothing.’

‘And how did you come to lose all this?’

The knight looked away down the glade in silence for a few moments, and then began to speak. ‘I have a son. I left him to hold my estates while I followed the king to the Holy Land, and when I returned two years later, I found my son in prison. He had slain a man. Oh! it was done in fair fight; but the man was an old foe of mine, and his friends were many and powerful. I spent all the money I had to save my son from death. I mortgaged the land my forefathers had held since long before William of Normandy set foot in England. What else could I do? I loved the lad. Now my land lies in pledge to the Abbot of St. Mary’s Abbey. To-morrow the mortgage falls due and I have no hope of redeeming it. I was on my way to York to throw myself upon his mercy when your men found me; and all the world knows that the Abbot of St. Mary’s Abbey has less mercy than the grey wolf of the wilderness.’

Robin nodded; then he demanded quickly: ‘What sum did the abbot advance you on your land?’

‘Four hundred pounds—though indeed the land was worth three times as much.’

‘And what will you do if you cannot redeem your land?’

The knight sighed, rather drearily. ‘I shall take my wife back to her own kinsfolk; they will support her, and I cannot. I shall leave England and go back to the Holy Land, and walk once more upon the hill of Calvary. I shall never return to my native country, for I could not bear to see a stranger holding the land of my inheritance.’

‘Have you no friends who could help you?’ asked Robin.

‘I thought I had friends in plenty—when I had no need of them,’ said the knight bitterly. ‘Now that this trouble has come upon me they do not know me.’

‘You have no friend at all? None who would act as surety for a loan?’

‘None, save God.’

‘Nay,’ said Robin, who thought this savoured too much of the Church. ‘I would not take even the holy saints as sureties for my good red gold!’

‘And I would not blame you. Yet I have no earthly sureties to offer, and in Heaven there is only Our Lady, who never deserted me until now.’

When Robin heard this he laughed suddenly and leapt to his feet. ‘That is a different matter,’ he cried. ‘I would take Our Lady’s bond for any sum. You could have no better surety.’ And turning to Little John, he bade him bring four hundred pounds from the treasury.

Little John, and Much, who was the treasurer of the band, went together to the secret place where the gold was kept and counted out the amount, taking care not to include any false or clipped coin. Then, acting on a kindly suggestion from Much, they took a rich surcoat and a gold-embroidered baldric from the store, and returned to where Robin and the knight were waiting.

The knight had been standing very still, staring away down the glade; but when he saw the gold and the surcoat, he turned to Robin, flinging out his hands to him, and his hands were shaking. ‘Why have you done this for me—a stranger?’ he asked.

‘You are no stranger,’ replied Robin. ‘You are Our Lady’s messenger.’

The knight drew a deep breath. ‘I shall not betray your trust,’ said he slowly. ‘When shall I repay you, and where? Name a day, and I will keep it.’

‘Come to me here beneath my trysting tree this day next year. That will give you time to gather the rents from your redeemed lands,’ Robin told him, and added with a smile: ‘It is not fitting for a knight to travel alone, so I will lend you a little page of my own to go with you.’ And he beckoned to Little John, who came forward amid a shout of laughter from his comrades.

Another horse was brought for the huge outlaw, both men swung into the saddle, and the knight, after bending down to wring Robin’s hand and thank him for his kindness, was already riding away when he checked his horse and looked back.

‘I have borrowed four hundred pounds from you and forgotten even to tell you my name. I am Sir Richard-at-Lea.’

‘You are Our Lady’s messenger, and that is enough for me,’ called back Robin. And so, with many shouted farewells ringing behind them, Little John and Sir Richard rode away.

Next morning the Lord Abbot of St. Mary's Abbey sat before the high table in his Great Hall, with his guests and his senior brethren around him. There was roast beef before him, boiled ham and greasy pie, and all manner of rich wines; and he ate loudly and greedily, with an appetite that was even larger than usual, for he was in a high good humour. Presently he wiped greasy lips and spoke to the prior—a lean, pale-faced man who sat among the brethren farther down the table.

‘Twelve months ago we lent four hundred pounds to a needy knight, Brother Julian, and if he does not come to repay it by noon to-day he loses all his possessions, and we shall be the richer by a fat estate! Our Lady grant he is not able to keep his tryst!’

‘The good knight may be ill, or overseas,’ said the prior, indignantly, ‘and it would be a foul wrong to declare his lands forfeit!’

‘No, no!’ replied the abbot, and he laughed fatly. ‘This was the day agreed upon, and he does not come; therefore his lands are ours.’

But Brother Julian cried out: ‘You dare not take his lands until noon, for that also was agreed upon. Shame on you, to ruin a good knight who never harmed you. If I had the money I would pay it—gladly—on his behalf.’

Then the abbot flew into a passion and drummed with his fists on the table, while his brow grew black. ‘The devil fly away with you and your conscience!’ he shouted. ‘You are for ever crossing me. But I have the Lord Chief Justice here to declare my legal right.’ And he pointed to a stately, bleak-faced individual sitting among the guests at his table.

At that moment the tapestry hangings over the doorway were pulled aside and in came the cellarer, an elderly man, bloated of body, and red of nose from overmuch tasting of the sack and malmsey wine in his charge, who shambled, grinning, to his place at table, full of mealy-mouthed congratulations for the abbot. ‘For,’ said he, ‘the knight is surely sick or dead, and *we* shall have the spending of four hundred pounds a year!’

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than the rich hangings were once again drawn aside and in the opening appeared a scared-looking porter, who announced: ‘My Lord Abbot, Sir Richard-at-Lea is here, and craves a word with you.’ And he disappeared again before the wrath and disappointment of the prelate could vent itself on his head.

Sir Richard came humbly into the hall and made his salutation to the abbot and his guests—some of whom had once been his friends. The abbot greeted him coldly, and many of the guests did not return his salutation at all. Sir Richard looked round at them bitterly, and he thought to himself that he would test them, to see if there was even one among them who would remember that he had been his friend in the days of his prosperity.

‘My Lord Abbot,’ he said, ‘I have come to keep my appointment.’

The abbot nodded insolently. ‘Have you brought the money to pay your debt?’

‘No, I have not brought it.’

‘Pledge me in malmsey, Sir Justice!’ cried the abbot with a brutal laugh. ‘For the land is mine!’ Then, turning back to the knight: ‘Why have you come if you have not the gold with you?’

‘To beg you, of your mercy, to grant me a little longer time in which to repay my debt.’

‘Not a day! Not an hour!’ replied the abbot, gloatingly. ‘You have broken your pledge and your land is forfeit!’

Then Sir Richard dropped on one knee and turned to the justice with pleading hands outflung. ‘Speak for me, Lord Justice.’

‘Nay,’ said the justice smoothly. ‘I hold to the law. I can give you no help.’

Sir Richard turned back to the abbot. ‘Gentle abbot, for the sake of Him who never refused mercy, give me my lands again, and I will be your humble servant until the debt is paid.’

The abbot refused, shortly. He was growing tired of this pestilent knight who was interfering with his meal. No one spoke for the man who knelt so humbly before them; those of them who had been his friends avoided his eye. ‘Unless I have my lands again you shall bitterly regret it,’ said Sir Richard, very quietly.

Then the abbot’s brow darkened once more with rage, his puffy face grew crimson, and he shouted thickly at Sir Richard: ‘Get out of my hall, you false knight!’

There was a moment’s silence; then Sir Richard rose to his feet and stood facing his persecutors with flashing eyes. ‘Liar!’ he cried. ‘I was never a false knight, and well you know it. I have been true to the vows of my knighthood. How have *you* kept the vows that you swore on the day you were made a monk? Answer me that, you bloated, grasping fiend!’

No one—save, perhaps, Robin Hood—had ever spoken to the abbot thus. He turned from red to purple, the veins swelled in his neck, and for a moment he seemed about to choke. Then he let out a bellow of rage and half rose in his carved chair, shouting insults at the knight, who watched him with a look of quiet contempt.

The startled guests and clergy sat as though turned to stone, staring aghast at raging abbot and scornful knight. The first to recover himself was the Lord Chief Justice, and as the abbot paused in his tirade for lack of breath, he turned to him and demanded: ‘What will you give me if I persuade this man to sign the deed of release? For without it you will never hold the land in peace.’

The abbot took a deep breath, swallowed thickly, and replied: ‘A hundred pounds for yourself.’

By now it was nearly noon, and Sir Richard thought it was time to drop the game, for he had no mind to risk his lands again. ‘Not so fast,’ said he, and turning towards the curtained doorway he called: ‘Little John!’

The tapestry was pulled aside, and into the hall strode Little John, bearing a leather bag, which he carried across to the table.

‘Give the Lord Abbot his money, Little John,’ said the knight; and the outlaw untied the neck of the bag and poured out the golden coins among the trenchers and wine-flasks.

The abbot stared at the gold with goggling eyes and open mouth, too astonished to move or speak, and the others about the table were in no better case. The ancient cellarer was the first to move, and putting out a greedy hand he began to count the coins.

‘Yes, count them well,’ said Sir Richard, with a hard laugh. ‘You will not find one missing.’ And when the counting was over, he turned back to the abbot: ‘Take your money, Lord Abbot, and give me my quittance. Not to-day do my lands pass into the keeping of St. Mary’s Abbey!’

The quittance was brought, also a quill and ink-horn, and the abbot signed it with a shaking hand. Sir Richard took it from him with a stately bow and, folding it, thrust it into his wallet. 'I call all those here to witness that I have kept my day and paid my debt in full,' he said, looking round the table. Then he turned on his heel and, followed by Little John, stalked out of the hall.

At the gates of York they parted and Sir Richard rode blithely homeward, while Little John made his way back to the Stane Ley to tell the joyous tale to Robin Hood.

A year passed, all save a few days, and in his castle at Linden Lea Sir Richard bethought him that the time was almost come to repay his debt. He spoke of it to his wife one evening as they strolled among the sweet-briar and sops-in-wine in her garden.

'I must set out for Barnesdale in a few days to repay my good friend Robin Hood his loan; and it is in my mind that I would like to take him a gift beside. You are wiser in such things than I, dear wife. What do you advise?'

The lady thought for a little while and then she said: 'If it were me, I would take him a hundred bows of red Spanish yew and a hundred sheaves of arrows flighted with peacock feathers.'

So Sir Richard gathered together the bows and the sheaves of arrows, and with two men to see to the train of pack-horses, he set out.

Riding at the head of his little troop he came, early the following morning, into a large village; and here, on the village green, the whole population had gathered to watch a midsummer wrestling bout.

A white charger was tethered under a tall mulberry tree at one side of the green. A pipe of wine stood close beside it, with a pair of embroidered gloves laid across the top, and hanging from a forked hazel twig Sir Richard caught the glitter of a gold ring.

'It must be about between two famous champions,' he thought, 'judging by the richness of the prize,' and because he had ever loved the sport of wrestling, he reined in his horse on the outskirts of the crowd, to watch. The two seemed well matched, and Sir Richard's face was alight with interest as he followed every movement of the wrestlers as they sought for the holds they wanted; but one of the men was tiring, his holds were less sure, and suddenly there was a shout from the people, and the victor staggered to his feet.

Sir Richard looked about him, and was surprised to see black looks and clenched fists that contrasted ill with the gay holiday garments of the people. Turning to a tall fellow beside him, he asked the meaning of this, and was told that the champion was a stranger and had therefore no right to win the prize.

'That seems hardly fair,' said Sir Richard, gently. 'He has won the prize by vanquishing his opponent fairly, and it is his, be he never so many times a stranger.' And he urged his horse forward through the crowd into the open turf of the prize-ring to the side of the stranger-champion, who stood staring about him in bewilderment.

The mob shouted angrily, and pressed forward around the knight and the wrestler; but the two men in charge of the pack-horses thrust their way through to their master's side, and at the sight of their resolute faces the hot resentment of the village people began to cool away. In a little while the whole crowd was

quiet.

Then Sir Richard turned to the wrestler, saying kindly: 'Take your prize, lad.'

The man looked up at him for a moment, then his young, troubled face broadened into a grin, and pulling his forelock with a 'Thank 'ee, sir,' he turned to take the bridle of the white horse. As he did so, the knight took a gold piece from his wallet, and called after him: 'Ho, lad! Will you sell me your pipe of wine?'

The wrestler looked back, laughing. 'Willingly, Master—I would sooner have its worth in money than a clumsy pipe of wine to carry along with me.'

So the gold piece and the pipe of wine changed hands, and no sooner was it done than Sir Richard called to the gaping crowd: 'See, good folks, here is a pipe of wine; broach it, and make merry, with my blessing.' And he touched his heel against his horse's flank, urging it forward.

The people parted to let him and his men through. Their dark looks were lightened, some of them called out a rough 'thank-you' after him, and a red-nosed old fellow, who looked as though he had broached many pipes in his time, struck up a song and began to jig up and down in the dusty highway. As he rode away, Sir Richard knew that the village was in a holiday mood.

He was now very late for his tryst, but he thought Robin would forgive him when he heard the cause of the delay, and so he rode on, blithely enough.

Meanwhile, Robin was waiting patiently enough in the Stane Ley. But noon came and went, and presently he began to look worried and to watch the far end of the glade, with a small frown between his eyes.

'Master,' said Little John, who was waiting beside him, 'let us eat now, and wait no longer.'

Robin shook his head. 'John lad, I cannot eat. I fear Our Lady is angry with me that she has not sent my money. And I would have staked my life on Sir Richard's honour.'

'Do not be downhearted, Robin,' said his tall lieutenant. 'The loan was not due to be repaid until noon. Something has happened to delay the knight a while, that is all.' And he put a huge hand on Robin's shoulder.

For a long while the two men waited, and then Robin said abruptly: 'Take Much and Will Scarlet, and go up to the Irmng Street, as you did last year; and bring a guest to dine with me. Be he messenger or minstrel, monk or villein, he will come in God's name.'

So the three took their bows and quivers and went up through the willow plantation to the Irmng Street. They had not long to wait before they saw a cavalcade approaching from the north. Two black monks rode at the head, and behind them came seven well-laden sumptermules and a file of two-and-fifty men-at-arms.

'See yonder monks?' said Little John. 'They look as though they have brought our pay!'

'But they are many, and we are only three,' replied Much, doubtfully.

Little John laughed softly in his throat. 'Unless we bring them as guests to our master we shall get no dinner. If you do not wish to go hungry upon this feast of Saint John, see to your bows, lads. I take the foremost monk... .' He broke off to watch the road in silence. 'Now!' As the cavalcade came trotting up the last

slope, the three stepped out into the road, bows bent and arrows ready nocked on strings.

Little John addressed himself to the leading monk: 'Shame on you, Sir Monk, to keep our master waiting!'

The monk reined in and sat looking down at him angrily. 'And who is your master, you great oaf?'

'Robin Hood, the lord of these parts. He bids you dine with him—and he is not used to being kept waiting!'

'Robin Hood, is he?' said the monk, with an ugly laugh. 'Robin Hedge-knifer! A foul thief if ever there was one, and he will be sure to hang on the gallows tree at the last!' And setting spurs to his horse, he strove to ride down the three outlaws.

Next moment Much's bow-string twanged and a long arrow hummed its way into the monk's heart. For an instant he swayed in the saddle, then crashed headlong to the ground and lay still; while his terrified mount sprang away among the men-at-arms. In the confusion all the men-at-arms took to their heels, thinking there was an ambush in the woods; and the second monk, bewildered and terrified, was easily taken captive.

'Well,' said Little John, 'that was neatly done. Now for dinner!' and leading the monk's horse by the bridle, followed by Much and Will Scarlet with the pack-mules, he set off for the home glade.

Robin greeted his unwilling guest with all courtesy. 'Welcome to the Greenwood, Reverend Sir. It is a happy chance that has sent you to us, on this feast of Saint John, for you shall say the mass for us and our own chaplain shall have a holiday.'

The monk was livid with spiteful fury, but he dared not disobey, and gabbled his way through the prayers while the outlaws knelt around him, reverently, with their caps doffed but their bows ready.

When the mass was over and the feasting began, the monk was set in the place of honour; Little John brought him a fine brass basin of water in which to wash his hands, and Robin himself served him with meat and wine, all of which frightened him greatly, for he wondered very much what it all meant and what was going to be done to him.

Presently Robin asked from which Abbey he came.

'From St. Mary's Abbey at York; and I am the cellarer,' replied the trembling monk.

Robin glanced at him with a glint of amusement in his eyes, which the other did not see. 'If Our Lady is your patron saint,' said he, humbly, 'you must intercede for me with her, for she has not sent me some money she owes me, and I fear she is angry with me.'

'But, Master,' said Little John comfortingly (but his eyes twinkled); 'if this good monk is her cellarer, no doubt he is her messenger also, and has brought you the money.'

Robin nodded and glanced up at Little John, with laughter twitching at the corners of his mouth. Then he turned gravely back to the cellarer, saying: 'Sir Monk, Our Lady stood surety for a loan between me and a certain knight, and the money is due to be repaid to-day; so if you bring it with you, give it to me now.'

At this the ancient cellarer became more terrified than ever. 'I know of no such suretyship,' he protested shrilly. 'I am a poor man, with only twenty marks in my coffers.'

'If that is the truth,' said Robin, 'I'll not touch a penny of it; indeed, I will lend you anything you may need. But if there is more than twenty marks, not a copper coin will I leave, for a monk should have no use for money.' And seeing the anxious eye which the old sinner cast in the direction of his sumpter-mules, he was sure that there was a goodly store of gold somewhere in the pack-saddles. So he made a sign to Little John to search the bags and coffers; and while it was being done, he sat enjoying the expression on the face of St. Mary's cellarer, who was in an agony of mingled greed and fear.

Little John went steadily to work. He spread a cloak upon the ground, and opening the coffers, poured their contents into it. When he had finished, he counted the pile of gold and silver coins which lay there, and then, gathering the cloak by its four corners, brought it to Robin.

'The monk spoke truly, Master. Here are his twenty marks, and here with them are the eight hundred pounds which Our Lady sends you in repayment of your loan.'

Robin flung back his head and laughed; then clapping the shrinking cellarer on the shoulder, he cried: 'Did I not say so, Sir Monk? Is not Our Lady the best surety a man could have? I lent only four hundred pounds, and she has repaid me twice over! Go back to your abbey in peace, man, and remember to tell your brethren of the good dinner Robin Hood gave you in Barnesdale Forest.' Grumbling and muttering that his dinner had cost him dear (though he was careful not to do so above his breath) the ancient cellarer was hoisted by willing hands on to his horse. The outlaws kept his sumpter-mules. 'For,' explained Will Scarlet, 'we would save you the trouble of driving such troublesome brutes single-handed.' And two of their number went with him to set him on the nearest track that led to York.

Late in the afternoon Sir Richard and his little troop rode into the Stane Ley, and the good knight swung down from his saddle as Robin strode forward to greet him. The two clasped hands, looking gladly into each other's eyes, like the friends they were. Sir Richard craved pardon for his delay and explained the cause of it. Then he turned to take his coffer from the saddle-bow; but Robin stayed him with a hand on his wrist.

'No, Sir Richard, let your coffer be.'

'But there are four hundred pounds in it, for the repayment of my debt,' said Sir Richard, with a puzzled smile.

'Your debt is already paid, and paid twice over.' And Robin told him the story of St. Mary's cellarer, drawing him away to sit beside him in the shade of the giant lime tree while he told it. 'Our Lady owed me four hundred pounds, and she has returned me eight hundred. So you must take the half, with my blessing; and if ever you should need more, come to me, and I will share with you whatever I have, whether it be much or little.'

Sir Richard strove to speak, but words were beyond him just then and he could only wring his friend's hand in silence. Meanwhile, his men, aided by some of the outlaws, had unstrapped the bows and peacock-flighted arrows from

the backs of the pack-horses, and now, one of them carrying a bowstave and the other a sheaf of arrows, they came across the glade to their master.

‘Here be the gear, Sir Richard,’ said the elder, ‘and not a cock-feather out of place.’

The knight glanced at the weapons and then back to the outlaw chief. ‘Friend Robin, you have refused to let me repay my debt, but you will not refuse my gift?’

Getting up, Robin put out his hand for the bowstave and bent it against his instep. ‘I will not refuse your gift,’ he said, smiling. ‘I accept it gladly, for its own sake and for the sake of the giver.’

Later that evening, when dusk was creeping up the Stane Ley and the owls were crying softly in the shadows, the outlaws settled down to their supper. Sir Richard sat with Robin Hood beside the largest of the camp-fires, feasting royally on roast venison and peacocks which had been poached by Simon-the-Fletcher from the poultry yard of Sir William de Trumpington. And next day, in the full glory of an early summer morning, he set out for Linden Lea once more.

It was some years before he and Robin came together again, but Sir Richard remained a loyal friend; and indeed, the day came when without his aid the outlaw brotherhood would have fared ill indeed.

How Marian came to the Greenwood

IN THEIR CAVES at Dunwold Scar the outlaws sat or sprawled around the fire. The spitting pine logs burned with clear red and saffron flames, sending up thick curling feathers of smoke that found their way out through a cranny in the rocks overhead. Outside, the cold February rain drenched down, turning the forest tracks into icy quagmires and every leaf on the holly bushes to a spouting water-chute. But within the great central cave of the many that honeycombed the sandstone scar, there was warmth and shelter, dry sand underfoot and warm, high-piled bracken for bedding, and the saffron flicker of firelight on the faces of the men and hounds gathered about the rude hearth.

Scarcely a man sat idle, for there were always many tasks to be attended to when ill weather closed the roads and hunting trail alike. Some of them were making new clothes or mending old ones; others were refurbishing their weapons. Will Scarlet was building himself a short birding bow; Little John, with a pot of glue heating in the fire beside him, was mending his fishing tackle; Robin himself was burnishing the red rust-blotches from his steel cap.

As they worked, the outlaws talked among themselves and to their guests—for they had, guests that day, as they often did in bad weather—a quiet palmer who had been found trudging along the sodden highway by Will-the-Bowman; a burly man-at-arms with a damaged knee that needed resting; and last, but assuredly not least, a very small man with a snub-nose and sloe-black eyes set very wide apart in his tanned face, who now sat in his shirt and scarlet hose, holding out a tattered particoloured surcoat to dry before the fire. He had pushed his fantastic red and yellow fool's cap back from his forehead, and every time he moved his head to look from one speaker to another, the tiny silver bells along the flaunting cockscomb rang very sweetly. He seemed a quiet little man, and though he sat there fully an hour, he had scarcely spoken; yet his face was alight with interest, and his bright black eyes flickered ceaselessly from face to face of all the outlaws scattered around the fire.

Presently Ket-the-Smith turned to him, saying: 'Now, Master Fool, how about a song? A song of love, or a song of battle—who cares, so long as it be a merry one?'

The little man shook his head and laughed. 'I am no minstrel, to sing you songs. A juggler am I, and my name is Peterkin. But if you are minded to see some juggling, the best juggling in all the North Country...'

'Lads!' cried Ket, looking round about him. 'Here is Peterkin the Juggler. He says he will juggle for us. Shall we take him at his word?'

'Yes,' cried the outlaws; 'let us have some juggling! Begin, Master Juggler—up with you, and begin!'

Work was laid aside and every man settled himself more comfortably, turning to face the little juggler, who first wriggled into his red and yellow surcoat, and then, getting up, opened his ragged bundle and delved inside it. Gay balls of painted wood rolled out on to the floor—the green of a breaking wave; the scarlet of a corn-poppy; the gold of saffron cake; the blue of the Madonna's mantle. Two or three little bright daggers spilled out after them, and he gathered them up and turned to face his eager audience.

Then an odd change seemed to come over Peterkin the Juggler; he was no longer a ridiculous little man—for a little while he was beautiful. The firelight flickered over his thin figure in its fantastic garments as he tossed up ball after ball, seemingly without any thought of the matter, until there were eight of them shuttling backward and forward above his head. Sometimes they seemed a continuous many-coloured arc; sometimes they would separate, and for an instant the firelight would pick out a ball of blue or crimson or bright gilt, or the sparkling blade of a little dagger.

The outlaws watched him entranced: the palmer forgot his beads, and the man-at-arms his aching knee. When at last he made an end, the great cave echoed and re-echoed with their roar of approval.

Smiling to himself, Peterkin sat down again and returned the gay baubles to his bundle. 'It be all in the knack,' he said, almost apologetically.

Then Robin spoke for the first time. 'It is a knack worth having, Friend Peterkin.'

'Oh aye! It earns me my bread and meat, and it gives pleasure to many—most of all to me.'

'Yet it must be a hard life in the winter.'

'Why, there are worse,' said the little man comfortably. 'I ply my trade in rich men's halls and village ale-houses, and I seldom want for my supper and a warm place to sleep—and there is always the spring coming, and the country fairs. Sometimes I juggle at weddings, too. I should be on my way to a wedding now... .' He broke off and cast a questioning glance at the grey curtain of rain beyond the entrance of the cave; seeing which, Robin said:

'It is cruel weather for travelling. Have you far to go to this wedding?'

'A matter of twenty miles or so—to Malaset, over beyond Locksley. The wedding is not until the day after to-morrow, but the guests will most likely have gathered by now, and there will be many of them, for 'tis a lordling's daughter that is being wed to a knight.'

'Her name, man—her name!' cried Robin harshly, and he sprang to his feet.

Peterkin the Juggler looked up in surprise. 'I have not heard her name; but she is daughter to Lord Robert Fitzwater of Malaset.'

'Do you know who is the bridegroom?'

'Aye, that I *do* know. He is Sir Roger of Doncaster: a black, covetous young villain, if ever there was one, and no fit mate for any woman. And this I *have* heard,' added Peterkin slowly: 'that in this marriage she does not follow her own heart.'

Robin turned away without a word, and went and stood in the opening of the cave, staring blindly out at the downpour.

So Marian was to be married, and to Roger of Doncaster—that smooth-faced young coxcomb, whose name had already begun to have an ugly sound in the

ears of the country folk. And she was being forced into the marriage; even if the little juggler had not said as much, Robin would have known that she did not follow her own heart. She was his: his dear Marian, alone and frightened in the power of that old tyrant, her father. He swung round to the juggler.

‘You say the wedding is not until the day after to-morrow?’

Peterkin nodded. Every outlaw in the place was silent, watching their leader.

‘Peterkin,’ said Robin, ‘I shall go with you to that wedding. Do you not think I shall make a fine minstrel?’ And without even noticing the surprised bewilderment on the faces of his band, he strode across to the mouth of one of the inner caves which opened from the main one, and disappeared inside.

The inner cave was one of the brotherhood’s treasure-stores; and when Robin came back a few minutes later, he carried a lute, and a rich suit of clothes which had been taken only a few days before from the baggage of a gay young nobleman on the Nottingham road. One leg of the silken hose was green, the other violet. The tight-fitting surcoat was particoloured in the same gay hues, and the wide, fantastically dagged sleeves were lined with rose-colour, while rose-colour also lined the hood of crimson velvet. Robin settled down by the fire again, with the exquisite garments across his knees; and taking woodash, staining lichen, and a sharp stone, he set to work to wreck them.

While he worked, he spoke to his followers: ‘Lads, you’ll be thinking that I am out of my wits; but listen to me. You know, all of you, what manner of man is Sir Roger of Doncaster. And the lady who is to be wed to him in two days time—against her will, as you have heard the juggler say—is my own dear lady. I have neither seen her nor spoken with her since I was proclaimed wolfshead, for the Greenwood is no life for a woman. But now it seems that there are worse things than the Greenwood, and so to-morrow I am going to bring her away.’

‘We will come with you!’ cried Little John.

‘Aye, we’ll come with you, Master!’ cried the others.

On the opposite side of the fire a boy sat forward with a jerk, his face alight with eagerness and his eyes shining. Gilbert Shuttleworth—or Gilbert-of-the-White-Hand, as the others had nicknamed him because of his girlish appearance—had good cause to hate Sir Roger of Doncaster, whose serf he had been. It was only a few months since his father, forced to work in the fields with the marsh fever upon him, and then flogged for skimping his work, had died of the flogging. Gilbert had fled to join the outlaws after that, but he had neither forgotten nor forgiven, and his eagerness to pay a little of the debt leaped in his eyes as he exclaimed: ‘Let *me* come with you, Master Robin.’

‘You shall come,’ Robin said kindly. He looked round on all of them. ‘Twenty of you shall follow me as far as the edge of Locksley Chase; but from there I go alone—save for Peterkin here, if he is not afraid to come with me?’

Peterkin shook his head until the bells on his fool’s cap rang sweet and shrill. ‘I be small in body, and a man of peace,’ said he in his slow, pleasant voice; ‘but I have my little knives, and I be no coward, Master.’

Next morning, in the grey dawn, two figures emerged from the creeper-hidden entrance to one of the caves, and struck away through the forest in the direction of the Nottingham to Sheffield road. One of them was the little juggler; the other was a tall, tatterdemalion minstrel who bore only a very slight resemblance to

the outlaw Robin Hood. He wore the stained and tattered remnants of what had once been a fine surcoat and hose of green and violet silk, and a hood of threadbare crimson velvet. He had stained his already brown skin to a gipsyish darkness with walnut juice. His hair was greased and flattened down beneath a fillet of twisted silk, and by careful use of a razor he had thinned his thick, level eyebrows, altering their shape and giving them a devilish upward quirk at the outer corners. He carried a ribboned lute, but there was a serviceable broadsword at his hip, and a dented buckler at his back—for in those days there was nothing unusual in a minstrel going armed against robbers on the lonely roads.

‘I suppose you *can* sing?’ asked Peterkin presently, as they went along.

‘Well enough,’ replied Robin briefly, and broke into song in a pleasant voice, accompanying himself on the lute. But after a few bars he fell silent again, and the two walked on without a word between them.

A mile behind them followed Will Scarlet and a score of the outlaw band, moving among the trees, silent and unseen in their winter brown, each man with bowstave in hand and well-filled quiver on hip.

On went Robin and Peterkin, the one striding, the other trotting along the highway, through a world that was clear-washed after the rain of the day before and blithe and gay in the early sunshine. The puddles in the deeply rutted road reflected the blue sky and the small white clouds. Though it was still winter, spring was in the air; the bare twigs of the forest were flushing purple with rising sap, and small birds were beginning to whisper the songs they would sing later in the year. Surely, thought Robin, on such a day as this all must go well and have a happy ending.

It was evening when they came at last down the long road through Locksley Village, and Robin looked about him with fondness at the little cottages crowding together in the dusk around their squat church tower.

On they went into the gathering darkness of the open dale beyond, where the road curved beside Locksley Chase, through the tiny hamlet of Malaset and out again to the last broad tongue of the Chase that reached down towards the road. Then at last they saw the great castle close before them, its buttressed keep standing dark against the primrose afterglow.

Standing hidden among the trees, the two men saw there were lights in the Gate House, and a great coming and going across the moat-causeway. Evidently some important wedding guest had just arrived, and his baggage animals had got mixed up with a donkey bringing in vegetables for the household.

Robin Hood waited until the causeway was clear again; then he laughed softly in his throat, and, twanging his lute, strode forward from the shelter of the trees and down towards the castle, with Peterkin the Juggler trotting beside him. The men-at-arms at the gate passed them through without a second thought, for a wedding always drew plenty of such folk: jugglers, tumblers, minstrels, and sword-dancers, and the guests within would no doubt be glad of entertainment.

The outer bailey was in darkness, save for the swinging light of a lantern as a groom hurried towards the stables, and empty save for a little page exercising two greyhounds in leash. But the inner bailey, when they reached it, was filled with light and bustle as servants, scullions, men-at-arms, and young squires hurried hither and thither about the business of the great castle and the wedding which was to take place on the morrow.

Swiftly Robin and Peterkin threaded their way through the throng and so came to the doorway of the great hall. The doors stood open and yellow light flowed down the steps and out into the hurry-scurry of the bailey. They asked permission of none—for on such an occasion as this no permission was needed—but strode boldly into the hall, Robin strumming his lute, and the bells on Peterkin's cap jingling as they went.

The steward's men were already ushering the gay company to their places at the long tables; and the golden light shimmered on silks and velvets and rich brocades in all the colours of the rainbow, dagged sleeves swung and long skirts trailed across the rush-strewn floor, jewels flashed and gold-work sparkled, as the knights and ladies moved about. There were lights everywhere: torches flared along the painted walls, waxen candles glimmered crocus-flamed all down the long tables, and the great fire on the central hearth shed a leaping radiance over the floor and the hounds which lay there waiting for scraps from the tables.

Peterkin bowed with a flourish to the company. 'Good e'en to you, Gentles all,' said he, and went swinging up the hall towards the raised dais at the farther end, whereon stood the high table.

Robin followed him, plucking gently at his lute and gay-seeming as though he had not a care in the world; but all the time he glanced about him in search of Marian.

He saw Lord Fitzwater already seated at the high table—paunchy, old, and ill humoured. He saw the bridegroom in the place of honour, clad in the flashing green of a dragon-fly and playing with the great ruby on his finger—a very exquisite young gallant. But cruelty showed in the lines of his red mouth and the coldness of his dark eyes. A little farther along the table he recognized the scarred face of Sir Hugh de Staunton, a kinsman of Marian, and judged by the grimness of the young knight's look that he had little liking for the match. The hall seemed full to overflowing with knights and ladies, little scurrying pages and portly stewards; but of Marian there was as yet no sign.

Next moment Peterkin had mounted the dais and leapt upon the damask-covered table, where he capered among the silver dishes and starry candles, without so much as oversetting a goblet or disturbing the longest feather in the spread tail of the roast peacock which had just been set upon the board.

Heads turned to watch him as he tossed up his balls and daggers, the gay baubles gleaming in the torch-light. The noise of many voices softened away, and even the old lord turned in his chair to watch for a few moments. But all was not well in the great hall: there was a growing uneasiness, and knights and ladies were beginning to whisper to each other all down the length of it, and turn often to glance at the door of the women's quarters, through which Marian should by now have come. The nobles at the high table looked at each other with raised brows; Lord Fitzwater had begun to scowl and to drum upon the table with his fat old fingers, while Sir Roger had ceased to play with his ruby and was biting his fingers in an agony of impatience.

Robin had put back his hood and was sitting on the edge of the dais, strumming his lute. He dared not seem to be watching the door of the women's quarters, but he could see it out of the corner of his eye, and he too was waiting for Marian to appear. He had no plan, save to get word with her; what came after must be left to the moment. If it were possible he would get her away during the

night, none knowing of her flight. If not, he had his broadsword and Peterkin his daggers. Hugh de Staunton had ever been a good friend to Marian, and could be counted on to draw his sword on her behalf if it came to fighting; and the little band of outlaws was waiting little more than a bowshot from the castle walls.

More and more huge dishes were being borne in from the kitchens: smoking pies, roast joints still on the spits, swans and peacocks with their feathers still upon them. The tables were laden with rich food, and the company waiting to begin; and still Marian had not come.

Peterkin finished his act, as though he had not noticed that anything was amiss, but when he leaped down from the table to Robin's side, he whispered: 'Your lady is taking her time, it seems.'

'Poor lass!' muttered Robin, not ceasing to strum his lute. There was no need for him to sing as yet, for already two tumblers in rags of green and crimson were tying themselves in knots for the amusement of the company. He was glad of this, for he was in no mood for song just then.

Suddenly the old lord let out a roar like an enraged bull, and banged both fists upon the table until the drinking vessels jumped and clattered. Humfrey, the chief steward, hurried to him and was sent trundling off as fast as his short legs would carry him, to fetch the Lady Marian. The guests looked at one another, and a bleak silence descended on the long hall, which had been so gay a little while before.

Then they heard running footsteps, and the tapestry over the doorway was dragged aside to reveal the steward, panting and wild of eye, with the white-faced women-servants behind him. 'My Lord!' he cried. 'Oh my Lord, the Lady Marian is *gone*!'

'*Gone*?' shouted Fitzwater, lurching to his feet; but the bridegroom had already sprung up with an oath, and catching the unlucky steward by the neckband of his tunic shook him like a rat.

All down the long hall a babble of voices had broken out; but Robin could hear the stammering voice of one of the maids telling how the steward had sent her to fetch her mistress, and how she had found the bower empty. And he could hear Fitzwater shouting that the castle must be searched, the gate-guard questioned, and his daughter instantly found. It seemed that everyone was shouting now, everyone running to and fro; and in the uproar Robin and Peterkin slipped away.

The men-at-arms at the gate were explaining to an agitated squire that no lady, let alone their own lady, had passed through the gate since *they* had been on duty, when the two came to the gate-house; and Robin strode blithely past them, calling out: 'Seemingly there will be no wedding here to-morrow, unless you can catch the bride!' But his face was grim and haggard in the light of the guard-room door.

A few minutes later they were safely across the causeway and on the open turf beyond. As they headed for the dark bulk of the Chase, Robin spoke quietly to his companion: 'It seems that you have had a bootless journey, friend Peterkin. Will you make for the village alehouse now? Or will you come with me and the rest of our party to search for my lady?'

‘I do not like to turn my back upon a venture before it is ended,’ said Peterkin slowly. ‘I will go with you to search for your lady. And when we have found her, I shall go with you still—if you will have me.’

‘Certainly we will have you.’

So Peterkin joined the Outlaw Brotherhood.

Among the first trees of the Chase they found the little band waiting. Will Scarlet’s voice whispered out of the darkness: ‘What news?’

‘She has gone,’ Robin answered dully. The men crowded round him, scarcely visible in the crowding shadows; and briefly he told them what had happened. ‘Lads,’ he finished, ‘we must find my lady before harm comes to her, or she is retaken by her father or that devil—Roger of Doncaster!’

‘We will find her, Master, never fear,’ came the answer from the darkness around him; and Robin’s heart warmed towards his men as he gave them their orders.

Diggery he sent off hot-foot to Kirklees Nunnery, for he thought perhaps Marian, knowing that Ursula, his kinswoman, was a nun there, had gone to her for shelter. He sent Gilbert off on the same errand to Sir Hugh de Staunton’s manor, over towards the Peak, and bade him search for her also on the road, since it was hardly likely that she would reach the manor that night.

But though she might have gone to either of these two, Robin knew in his heart that she was far more likely to have gone eastward into Sherwood or Barnesdale, seeking him; and he portioned out his men accordingly. This man was to watch the Nottingham road; this man to watch the track from Doncaster; a party to cut south through the forest towards Sheffield; another, under Will Scarlet, to search the southern skirts of Barnesdale. So he divided the forest among searchers in a wide curve about the eastern sides of Locksley.

Finally, he sent Roger Lightfoot, the swiftest runner of them all, speeding back through the forest to Dunwold Scar, to rouse out the rest of the band. The score of men split up into their separate parties, and melted into the darkness; and Robin Hood was left standing alone among the stately trees of Locksley Chase, where so often he had walked and ridden with Marian.

Where was she now, he wondered? Was she safe? The forest, which was a familiar friend to him, would be full of danger to a defenceless girl who did not know its ways. And how desperate and afraid she must have been, before she made up her mind to run away. Robin dropped his ribboned lute on the turf, and turning on his heel plunged away into the darkness.

By the following dawn the whole outlaw band—save for a few under the captaincy of Little John, who were to remain at the Scar in case Marian should find her way there—were out and scouring the forest from Nottingham to Barnesley; but all that day they searched without success, and Robin with them.

Diggery and Gilbert returned from their errands with word that Marian had not gone either to the nunnery or her kinsman’s manor; and the day drew on to evening. Robin had not rested, and scarcely eaten, since the search began; nor did he rest the following night, but still walked the forest deer-paths in the moonlight, his bedraggled finery more stained and tattered than before, his face haggard beneath his hood.

Dawn found him following a narrow track between the little villages of Sheffield and Worksop, not many miles from Dunwold Scar. It was a quiet dawn,

giving promise of a glorious day later; but Robin, usually so alive to the beauty of the forest, did not see the shreds of mist among the trees, nor the lengthening catkins on the hazel sprays. On he went, moving wearily down the track, for he was very tired; and as he rounded the corner into a broad ride among the trees, he saw a figure seated on a fallen tree-trunk some twenty yards from him. The light was still bad, but he could see that it was a stripling boy in a rough tunic and great-hooded capuchin, who sat with elbows on knees and head sunk in cupped hands, a broadsword at his side and a round buckler lying on the turf at his feet.

Robin halted for a moment, and then went on. He took no particular pains to be silent, and a moment later a twig snapped sharply under his foot. Instantly the boy snatched up his buckler, and springing up, stood like some wild thing at bay. Robin could not see the face in the shadow of the great hood, but he liked the boy's speed and his look of defiance, and called out to him, kindly enough: 'Nay, my little game-cock, I mean you no harm.'

For answer, the boy gave an odd, short cry, and drawing his sword, made straight at Robin, shield up, blade raised to strike. Then Robin laughed grimly, and drawing his own sword, stepped forward to meet him.

They met, shield to shield, and their blades rang together. The boy was as quick on his feet as a wild cat, and as fierce; but he was no match for Robin, though the outlaw fought only on the defensive, contenting himself with warding off the blows aimed at him. At last, growing tired of the fight, Robin brought up his blade with a flash, and beat his assailant's sword from his hand. The weapon flew wide, to land with a thud on the grass some way off. And then a strange thing happened, for the brave swordsman dropped his buckler, and sinking down upon the turf, held out imploring hands, and begged in a girl's voice: 'Mercy! Have mercy, good sir, and let me go away!'

For a long moment Robin remained staring down at the bowed figure; then he cast down his own sword, and stooping suddenly, put back the clumsy hood.

Long golden-brown hair flowed out over his hands, and next moment he had his lady in his arms. She had known him at the moment when he bent over her to put back her hood, and with a little glad cry laid her head against his breast like a tired child.

'Sweetheart,' he said at last, 'what possessed you to do such a mad thing?'

'Why, I am not such a poor swordsman after all,' said Marian, between tears and laughter. 'For you taught me yourself, Robin, long ago in Locksley Chase. And how was I to know you in those clothes? And when you came upon me so suddenly, I was afraid.'

'And so you attacked me because you were afraid, my valiant lady?' said Robin gently. 'And as for these clothes: I put them on to play the minstrel at your wedding, meaning to bring you away to the Greenwood. But you had already flown—and I have been searching for you ever since.'

'Oh, Robin, if I had only known! But I had no one to counsel me. I have been so unhappy since you were proclaimed an outlaw. I have had no word from you in all these years, and I did not know how to get a message to you when my father chose a husband for me and I was in need of your help. So at last I stole some food and a broadsword and took one of the scullions' Sunday clothes, and came to look for you.'

‘Dear love,’ said Robin gravely, ‘I have sent you no word in all these years because I thought it best that you should forget me—wolfshead as I am. But now that you have come to me, why, Friar Tuck shall wed us this very day.’

So they set out for Dunwold Scar, walking hand in hand, and as blithe as birds on a tree, though both of them were very weary. And as they went, they talked together joyously, for they had many things to say to each other after the years they had been parted.

The sun was yet low in the blue sky of early morning when they came into the long forest-ride below the caves of the Scar, and the few outlaws who had been left there were moving about, collecting arrows and unstringing bows after the morning’s target practice. They came running to their leader—then, seeing his companion, checked a little shamefacedly, uncertain how to greet a lady (for Marian’s long hair still streamed loose about her shoulders and her face was no longer shadowed by her hood).

Robin saw their uncertainty and called his tall lieutenant out from the others. ‘Little John,’ said he, ‘this is my dear lady.’

Little John came forward and dropped on one knee before Marian, raising to his lips the hand which she held out to him. She looked down at him very kindly, saying: ‘So you are Little John? I have heard much of you already, though ’tis scarcely two hours since Robin found me.’

Little John flushed with pleasure beneath his tan, and from that moment was her staunch friend and devoted slave.

Then came the others, one by one, to bend the knee to her; and Marian turned from one to another, gravely, as Robin told her their names. Lastly came the gigantic friar, with his ban-dogs thrusting around him as usual. He took her hand, very kindly, in his, while the dogs stood round with stiff legs and quivering noses. They were enough to scare any maid, those great hounds, and Little John would have whistled them off; but Marian was used to dogs, and of a good courage, and she held out her hands to them, speaking to them softly. With pricked ears they came forward to sniff at her hands; the pack leader began to wag his tail, Orthros whined deep in his throat. They had accepted her into the band.

Robin turned away, and calling out three of his men, sent them off: Roger Lightfoot southward, George-a-Green westward, and Hob-o’-the-Hoar-Oak to the north, to begin the recall of his scattered band from their search.

‘And now,’ cried he, as the three men sank into the forest in their different directions, ‘food, Little John! Food—and a great deal of it!’

So Marian and Robin sat down side by side on the soft turf below the caves: he still in his bedraggled minstrel’s finery, she in the scullion’s Sunday clothes; and Little John brought them cold venison and manchet bread in a napkin of fine linen. They ate hungrily, while in the glade before them the outlaws continued with their daily tasks—though they often paused to glance aside at the lady.

The pale February sunshine dappled the turf, where the tiny green rosettes of the primroses were beginning to uncurl; the little brook which ran down one side of the glade sparkled between its rushy banks; a robin sang his heart out from the topmost branch of an oak tree, and in all broad Sherwood there were no happier people than Maid Marian and Robin Hood.

Robin Hood and the Potter of Wentbridge

ONCE AGAIN THE forest was a place of rustling leaves, and dancing sun-splashes on turf and tree-bole. The hawthorn trees were in bloom, and in the open parts of the forest the gorse flamed golden as though all the furze was afire.

Three months had passed since Marian came to the Greenwood. At first the outlaws had been shy of her, and shy of having a woman among them—‘And her a fine lady, too!’ as Hob-o’-the-Hoar-Oak said to Much-the-Miller’s-Son. But Marian had shown herself a worthy comrade. When Roger Lightfoot had cut his hand half off she had neither shrieked nor swooned, but held the edges of the gash together while Robin stitched it. She had not been afraid when there was an alarm of an attack, but had calmly strung her bow and taken her place beside Robin. She had not complained when the nights were cold. She took her turn at cooking and cleaning, and her place among the younger outlaws at the daily target-practice. Above all, she was friendly: laughing with them, sharing their joys and sorrows; and so, little by little, they grew to accept her as one of themselves, especially Friar Tuck’s dogs, who loved her dearly.

On this particular morning she had gone up with Robin to visit the pickets watching the Nottingham road for a rich merchant who they had heard was to pass that day. She stood looking away down the road: tall and slender as a birch tree in her long green gown, with her russet hair bound closely round her head. Her gown was of the same Lincoln cloth as the tunics of the wood-rangers, and the skirt was caught up through her belt so that it should not get in her way; under it she wore men’s long hose and rawhide shoes. There were four clothyard shafts in her belt, and she carried a bow which Will Scarlet had built for her. It was a light bow with a pull of thirty pounds—very different from the great bows with their lateral pull of a hundred pounds which none but Robin and Little John could bend—but already she could use it well.

It was very pleasant among the nut trees by the wayside, and very quiet, so that they heard the trit-trot of pony’s hooves and the trundling of cart wheels while they were yet a long way off.

‘Now, who comes here?’ said Robin softly, as the outlaws rose and moved back into the deeper shadows of the trees.

Little John remained where he was, gazing northward through a little opening between the nut trees. Then, as the trit-trot and the trundling drew nearer he laughed, and stepped back.

‘It is the proud Potter of Wentbridge. I know him of old—a stiff-necked creature, and he has never, to my knowledge, paid any toll for passing through the forest.’

‘Has he not?’ replied Robin. ‘By the powers, he shall do so now!’

A moment later he parted the nut bushes and stepped out into the road. A fat little pony was coming along the Nottingham road at a fast trot, drawing behind him a neat, small cart. Seated in the cart, among a pile of gaily coloured earthenware pots, was a large, burly man with a brown smock, a red face, and a jaunty pheasant's feather in his slouch hat.

Robin stood waiting at the side of the road, and caught the pony's bridle as it drew level with him. The fat little creature came to a docile halt at once, and Robin laughed up into the indignant face of the potter above him.

'Come, Master Potter,' said he. 'Why such a surly visage? All I ask is that you pay me my just toll of silver; then you may go on your way unmolested.'

The potter's usually pleasant face grew dark with rage. 'Not a piece of my good silver do you see!' he cried; and then, leaning down to look more closely at the tall man in green, demanded with sudden suspicion: 'What might *your* name be?'

'Men call me—Robin Hood,' answered Robin, warily watching the potter's face.

'*Do* they?' asked the man. 'Do they indeed?' And he leapt down from his little cart and hurled himself upon the outlaw.

Robin was ready for him, and the two came together in the middle of the road. The potter was a powerful man and, though he was a little shorter than Robin, he had a grip like the hug of a brown bear, and a face which did not seem to feel the blows which the other planted on it.

For a while they reeled to and fro, sometimes locked together, sometimes smiting joyously at arm's length. At last Robin got in a strong left to the point of the jaw. The potter sagged for a moment, and then bore heavily forward. As Robin stepped back he caught his heel against a half-buried stone, and next instant lay flat on his back with his antagonist on top of him. He had hit his head in falling, and was half stunned, so that for a moment the potter had him at his mercy. Then the outlaws, who had been watching delightedly all this while, broke from cover and flung themselves upon the potter.

Little John was the first to reach him, Peterkin was the second, and then came all the rest of the picket, including Marian. They hauled the potter off his victim, rapped his head sharply on the hard road to mend his manners for him, and sat him up against the wheel of his own cart.

Robin was by this time also sitting up, and the two surveyed each other dizzily, rubbing their heads. Then they smiled, and getting slowly to his knees, Robin held out his hand in token of friendship. Still sitting against the wheel of his cart, the potter returned his grip warmly, and nodded.

'Wolfshead you may be,' he said; 'but you're a good man to fight!'

'So are you,' answered Robin, 'though you *are* only a potter!'

'*Only* a potter?' cried the other. '*Only* a potter? Now by the saints in Heaven, I am minded to give you the trouncing you deserve, for you are an insolent puppy if ever there was one!'

Robin shook his head. 'No, no, friend Potter, for my bones are still sore from the last one. But I see you have a bow in your cart—come and beat me at the butts instead.'

Now it was the potter's turn to shake his head. 'I am not such a fool as to pit myself for marksmanship against the best marksman in all the North Country. If

you wish to show off your shooting, go to Nottingham, good lad. The sheriff is holding an archery contest this afternoon for his men-at-arms and any other folk who like to try their skill. Go and win the forty shillings he is offering as the prize.'

'An archery contest, eh?' said Robin thoughtfully; and then he laughed. 'Yes, I will go to Nottingham. I will go at once. Friend Potter, will you lend me your clothes and cart?'

'And what of my pots, may I ask?'

'I will sell your pots for you—as well as even *you* could do yourself, I'll warrant!'

Marian did not like him to run into needless danger, and looking at Little John's gloomy face, she knew that he liked it no better than she did; but they knew better than to try talking Robin out of anything on which he had once set his mind. So Robin changed clothes with the potter and climbed into the little cart. The little pony, which had stood placidly all this time, started at once when he shook the reins, and broke into a trot. So pony, cart, pots, and make-believe potter disappeared round the corner of the road, and the trit-trot of hooves and the trundling of wheels grew quickly fainter in the distance.

The real potter, the outlaws, and Marian looked at one another. 'The lad's mad!' exclaimed the potter.

Meanwhile, Robin was bowling gaily along the road in the sunshine, whistling to himself and the pony as blithely as a blackbird on a hawthorn branch.

It was yet early when he reached Nottingham, and, after leaving the pony and cart at an inn in Chandler's Lane, he made his way to the market, carrying his wares with him in two great baskets. There he took up his pitch, arranging the pots round him, and began to cry his wares.

Soon he had attracted a large crowd and the housewives of the town began to press forward, handling the pots and admiring their shapes and the gay colours of the glaze. Robin sold cheaply, charging only threepence for five pots, and did such a roaring trade that by noon he had only five pots left. These he gathered into one of the baskets, and set out along the narrow cobbled streets towards the house of Ralf Murdoch, the sheriff.

The sheriff's house was a fine building: heavily timbered, and gay with painted carvings above the door and windows. Robin mounted the milk-white steps to the door and beat upon the timbers with his clenched fist. When a servant came in answer to his summons, he gave her the pots, bidding her take them to her mistress as a gift from the Potter of Wentbridge.

The girl disappeared and Robin remained where he was, admiring the carved and painted garlands above the door, until a few moments later the sheriff's wife came herself to thank him very prettily for his gift. 'Such fine pots I never did see,' she said. 'Next time you come to Nottingham, Master Potter, bring me some more, and I will buy as many as you will sell me—especially if they are popinjay blue, like the largest of those you have given me, for I do dearly love popinjay blue.'

Robin bowed pompously and pretended to turn away; then he hesitated, sniffing loudly at the savoury smell of cooking which was beginning to steal out through the doorway. The sheriff's wife was an hospitable soul, and she said at once: 'Will you not stay and dine with us, Master Potter? You will be very

welcome, both for the sake of your pots and yourself.'

Robin bowed again. 'I shall be very glad to dine with you,' said he, 'and I thank you for your hospitality, madam.' And doffing his hat he followed her into the house.

The sheriff was in a bad temper, having just been worsted in a business deal; but surly as he was by nature, even he could not turn away a guest simply because of his own ill humour, for such churlish conduct would not look well in the Sheriff of Nottingham. So he grunted out a half-hearted welcome and, turning on his heel, left his wife and Robin to follow him into his hall, where the long trestle tables were already set for dinner.

Being only a potter, Robin did not sit among the sheriff's friends at the high table, but among the men-at-arms and poorer folk farther down the hall. Little he cared, for the men-at-arms were better company than the fat merchants; and so he made a very merry meal and ate heartily of the sheriff's roast beef and crusty bread, washing it down with draughts of ale out of a horn mug.

When the meal was over the diners got up, pulled each a forelock to the sheriff's lady, and drifted out in ones and twos and little groups towards the archery-butts outside the town walls. Presently, the sheriff joined them with his lady, and Robin found himself standing quite close to them, with the rough walls of Nottingham behind him and a long space of smooth turf in front, blocked at either end by the hundred-paces-distant straw targets. Many of the townsfolk had gathered there to watch, some had brought their bows, meaning to compete for the forty shillings.

The first man-at-arms stepped out to shoot, and Robin watched him closely as he nocked his arrow and loosed; but the arrow sped down the range and missed its target altogether. Another man came forward, and again Robin watched; but as the afternoon wore on, and men-at-arms shot against townsmen, and townsmen against men-at-arms, he began to lose interest, for the marksmanship was poor, and not a single shaft struck within an arrow-length of the mark.

'It seems to me, Master Sheriff, that these men of yours have little skill with the bow,' said he at last.

'Perhaps *you* could do better?' grunted the sheriff, peevishly.

Robin nodded. 'I could—easily.'

Sheriff Murdoch stared at him scornfully for a moment, and then, turning to a yeoman standing near, bade him bring two or three bows for the potter to choose from. When the bows were brought Robin tested them, and at once laid two of them aside; the third he tested again, shaking his head gloomily.

'Indeed, you're but a poor weapon,' sighed he. 'But since there is no better to be had, I must do the best that I can with you.'

A little, merry-faced man brought him a quiver, from which he chose the best arrow. Then he stepped out into the open, ignoring the good-natured jeers of the onlookers, and bending the borrowed bow, nocked his arrow to the string, and loosed well above the target to allow for the bow being a much less powerful one than he was wont to use. The shaft soared away like a giant bee in the sunshine, and everybody heard the clear 'thwack' as it struck the straw target scarcely a hand-breadth from the central peg. A ragged cheer went up from the onlookers, and Robin strolled down to the target, and plucking out his arrow, turned about to shoot back. There was no jeering this time, and a moment later a yell broke

from yeomen and men-at-arms alike, as the arrow thudded into the second target. It had split the peg in three!

There was no more shooting after that, for no one could hope to equal the potter's marksmanship; and so he was adjudged the winner, and hustled along to where the sheriff's wife waited to give him the prize. Doffing his hat, with its jaunty pheasant's feather, he bowed low to her as she put the little jingling bag into his hand, and she smiled and said: 'Never did I see a potter the like of you!'

'Humph!' said the sheriff gruffly, as though it hurt him to give praise. 'How did you learn to shoot like that, my man?'

'Why, my father was a forester, and I have handled a bow since I was scarce as tall as a clothyard shaft is long,' replied Robin. 'And indeed I have shot with Robin Hood himself, before now, respectable potter though I am.'

When the sheriff heard this his eyes glistened in his fat, ruddy face, for he had long wished to have the hanging of the famous outlaw; and he said: 'Robin Hood, that rascally wolfshead? And do you know where Robin Hood is now?'

'Aye,' answered Robin. 'He is in Clumber Forest, not a dozen miles from here, and but ten of his band with him, for the rest have gone north to their summer quarters.'

Sheriff Murdoch began to fairly tremble with eagerness, and putting a hand on Robin's shoulder, he said: 'Good Master Potter, will you lead me to the lair of this wolfshead?'

Robin pretended to consider deeply. At last he said: 'I do not like to betray a man who I have shot with, and yet—I seem to have heard of a reward on his head?'

'One hundred golden nobles,' said Murdoch; and added unwillingly: 'If you help me to take him, you shall have twenty for your trouble.'

'Twenty-five,' said Robin briefly, in the manner of a tradesman closing a bargain.

Murdoch swallowed, and grew purple in the face. 'Twenty-five,' he agreed at last; so the matter was settled.

Robin slept in the sheriff's house that night; and next morning took a courteous farewell of Mistress Murdoch, and, fetching the pony and cart from the inn where he had left them, drove blithely away. With him went the sheriff riding a black horse, and twenty of the men-at-arms trudging in the dust behind.

Out through the north gate they went, and took the Doncaster road; but soon after the road ran into the forest Robin got down from his cart, and leaving it and the pony in charge of one of the men-at-arms, struck off down a bridle-path, followed by the rest. Soon he left the path also and took to the forest, leading the sheriff's horse by the bridle.

They went on and on, through tangled thickets, down long glades, across boggy clearings, by narrow deer-paths so faint that none but the trained eye of a forester could follow them, deeper and deeper into the heart of the forest. Sometimes a jay screamed harshly overhead; once a red shadow slunk away into the undergrowth at their approach, and a little farther on a late-hunting owl swept across their path, making the sheriff's horse snort and whinny with terror.

By now they had come to the oldest part of the forest. Here the trees were hoary with age and crowded in upon each other, grey with lichen and twisted into uncanny shapes, seeming, in the half-light, to stretch out clutching hands;

and the little band of men-at-arms began to mutter together and glance uneasily over their shoulders into the crowding shadows behind them. None of them had ever been as deep as this into the forest, and they liked it not at all.

Sheriff Murdoch did not like it either, and at last he spoke uneasily: 'This is a strange, uncanny place that you have brought us to, Master Potter!'

'Would you expect a wolfshead to have his lair on the high-road for any chance corner to find?' asked Robin grumpily; and they went on again in silence.

The forest began to open out again, becoming greener and more friendly, so that the sheriff and his men breathed more freely and glanced less often behind them.

At last they came to the head of a long glade, and here Robin halted them. He seemed to be listening for something, and when the harsh honking of a carrion-crow sounded three times from a nearby thicket, the men-at-arms could not have known that it was made by Little John and that it meant: 'Who goes there?' Nor could they know, when the potter gave an odd, shrill whistle in reply, that it meant: 'It is I, Robin.' But they did think he was behaving very oddly, and suspicion began to dawn on them that they had walked into a trap.

Robin turned to face them, laughing, and taking his horn from under his cloak wound a gay call, 'Tan-tan-tar-tran-tan,' and under the horrified eyes of the sheriff and his followers, seemed to melt into the forest. In terror they turned to fly, but it was too late; before they had stumbled twenty paces, before the sheriff had even managed to turn his terrified horse, they were surrounded by tall, green-clad men who suddenly appeared between the trees, and closed in on them.

Robin's voice sang out cheerfully from somewhere ahead of them. 'Take their weapons away, lads, but don't hurt them overmuch.'

The twenty men-at-arms stood no chance against four-score forest-rangers. In a few moments they had been disarmed and taken prisoner. Then Robin turned to the sheriff, who had been pulled from his horse and now stood fuming between Will Scarlet and grim old Watkin, with his arms twisted behind his back.

'You'll not see your hundred gold nobles *this* time, Master Sheriff!' said Robin. 'And indeed you may think yourself lucky if you go home with your head still fixed to your fat shoulders!'

The sheriff was purple with rage, but to do him justice, he was no coward.

'You—you tricked me!' he spluttered.

'Yes,' Robin nodded, 'I tricked you very prettily. Now I shall have you stripped of those fine clothes of yours, and any money you have in your wallet, and perhaps the memory of your loss may make you more cautious another time!'

The sheriff looked at his men-at-arms, as though hoping they would rescue him; but they were as helpless as he, each man in the grip of two burly forest-rangers. And seeing no help for it, Sheriff Murdoch stood still while Little John took from him his wallet and the gold chain from his neck and the gold ring from his finger, then stripped him of his rich black furred gown and velvet cap. When it was done he stood miserably in nothing but his shirt and hose.

Robin cast one scornful, laughing glance at him, and turned to Little John, saying: 'Take away the horse, John; it is too fine a steed for such a sorry rider; and bring in its place the white palfrey we took last week.'

When Little John came back with the palfrey, Robin himself aided the raging and shirt-clad sheriff to mount. 'Ah! rage away, Master Sheriff,' said he. 'Maybe it will keep you warm on your homeward ride! Give the palfrey to your lady wife, with all thanks for her hospitality, from Robin Hood.' Then, turning to his tall lieutenant: 'Take them up to the Nottingham road by the shortest way, John, and two score of the lads with you, to make sure they do not miss their way and wander back.'

'You shall pay for this!' shouted the sheriff. 'I will have you hanged, drawn, and quartered! I will appeal to the king! I will—'

Little John caught his bridle and turned the palfrey's head towards the forest-glooms; and so, still spluttering, swearing, and vowing vengeance, the sheriff was hustled off on his homeward way.

When he and his men-at-arms, together with the outlaw escort, had all disappeared among the trees, Robin sent Much, Peterkin, and George-a-Green to reclaim the pony and cart; then, followed by the rest, he walked down the long glade, parted a mass of hazel and dogwood at the farther end, and came out into the open ride below Dunwold Scar.

Marian was standing beside the cooking fire, with the large iron stew-spoon still in her hand. 'Robin!' she called. 'What has happened? We heard your horn, and the lads ran; but I could not leave the stew. Why did you sound your horn? And what was the meaning of the shouting and laughter I heard afterwards?'

Meanwhile, the potter, who had been sitting on a log beside the fire, had got up and was demanding: 'What of my pony? What of my cart? What of my pots?'

Robin did his best to answer both of them at once, and at last, opening the sheriff's wallet, counted out five gold nobles. 'Will this cover the cost of your pots?' he asked, smiling.

The potter took the money without a word, looking very hard at Robin the while. 'Folks call you a robber,' said he at last; 'but *I* think you are an honest man and a generous one, and so, after I have changed clothes with you, and before I take to the road, I should like to shake your hand again.'

'And so you shall,' said Robin. 'But will you not stop and eat with us before you go?'

But the potter was already pulling off Robin's green tunic, and shook his head. 'No, no. I must be on my homeward way.' So Robin doffed the loose brown smock, and after they had changed clothes once more, they struck hands and parted, the best of friends.

Robin Hood and Alan A'Dale

BROWN LEAVES WERE drifting down the autumn gale as Robin stood one morning beside the road that ran through the forest from Sheffield to Doncaster. He had been about to cross, when, in a lull of the wind, he heard the merry sound of someone whistling as he came along the road, and he waited to see who it might be. Round the bend came a young man, striding along blithely, and whistling as he went. From throat to heel he was clad in gayest scarlet, and his yellow hair whipped about his face, for he wore no cap.

For a few moments Robin watched him, with a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes; but as the young gallant drew level with him, he stepped out from the trees, arrow ready nocked to bowstring.

‘You seem to be in a blithe good humour, my brave young popinjay!’ said he. ‘Have you any gold in your wallet, young sir? If you have, I am sure you will gladly give it to me, so that my lads and I may drink your health.’

‘If there were any gold in my wallet,’ replied the young man, not seeming to notice the drawn bow, ‘I would be very glad to give it to you to drink my health, for I am to be married to-day; but the only gold I have is a wedding ring for my bride. Yet stay a moment; here are five shillings. I have no more. Take them and welcome.’ And he held out the coins in the palm of his hand.

Robin shook his head and lowered the bow. ‘I’ll not rob a bridegroom going to his wedding. Go your way, lad, and may you be happy, and your bride also.’ He stepped back into the brown forest shadows; and after gazing in surprise for a few moments at the place where he had disappeared, the young gallant went gaily on his way, whistling as before.

Robin halted among the trees, and turned to watch the scarlet-clad figure striding away into the distance; then, crossing the road, he also went on his way, thinking no more of the matter. But before that same time next day he was to see the young man again.

The outlaw leader was sitting in the opening of his cave in Dunwold Scar, with Marian beside him, he binding a fishing-rod, she combing her hair in the windy autumn sunshine. The morning meal was over and the cooks were cleaning up after it, while some of the men made ready for target-practice. One of the dogs lay close beside the cooking-fire gnawing at a bone.

Suddenly the hazel bushes at the far side of the glade were parted, and out into the open came Ket-the-Smith and Will Stukely, walking one on either side of a haggard and dishevelled young man who came striding across the glade to stand before Robin.

The outlaw leader did not recognize him for a moment, so different was he from the blithe young gallant of the day before. Gone was his scarlet tunic and hose, gone all his light-hearted gaiety. He was clad in a weatherworn leather jack and mail coif; on his curly yellow head was a light steel cap, and a long sword hung at his hip. He seemed a very grim young man, but somehow Robin liked him better thus than in his scarlet of yesterday.

Robin sat quietly looking up at him for a few moments, and the young man stood as quietly looking down at Robin. Ket-the-Smith was explaining: 'Us found this lad on the Doncaster road, Master. He was asking for you.'

Robin nodded. 'What of your wedding?' asked he. 'You have not the look of a new-made bridegroom!'

'I am not a bridegroom,' the young man said harshly. 'When I reached the house of Sir Simon de Beauforest, who is my lady's father, I found the gates barred against me; and to-day my Alice is to wed Sir Niger le Bigot, because he is powerful and her father fears him.'

'Niger le Bigot,' said Robin thoughtfully. 'Surely he is very ancient to be a young maid's bridegroom?'

'And a black-hearted villain into the bargain!' added the young man, savagely. Robin nodded. Niger le Bigot's name and his evil reputation were well known to him. He had had one wife already, and she had killed herself rather than suffer his cruelties any longer; grim tales of serfs put to death and of a torture-chamber in his castle clung like murky cobwebs about his name, making it feared and hated throughout all Sherwood.

Glancing aside for a moment into Marian's indignant face, he got up, and putting his hand on the other's mail-clad shoulder said kindly: 'And you thought I might help you?'

The young man nodded, and Robin went on: 'Yet you know nothing of me, save that I nearly robbed you yesterday.'

'I did not come to seek the man I met yesterday,' replied the other. 'I came to seek Robin Hood, my father's friend, not knowing that they were one and the same.'

'Your father's friend?' Robin looked at him more closely.

'Yes, I am Alan A'Dale, son of Sir Richard-at-Lea.'

'Are you indeed?' cried Robin. 'Then I will do all that I can for you, Alan, for the sake of your father. But tell me one thing: why have you not gone to him for help in this?'

'My father knows nothing of what has happened, for I have lived in my own house over Newstead way, and farmed my own land this year and more. And I did not go to him, because he has suffered enough on my account already—as you know well, for it was you who saved him from the ruin that I had brought upon him.' Alan broke off, and glanced round at the brown-clad men who had all dispersed to their different duties and pastimes; flushing crimson to the rim of his steel cap, he began to fidget with the buckle of his sword-belt. 'I am a poor man,' he said at last. 'I can give you and your men nothing in payment; but if you will aid me to save my true love, I will be your faithful slave.'

'Our Lady forbid,' said Robin, 'that I should take payment for aiding the son of my friend. But Le Bigot is a powerful man, as you say, and has powerful friends. The Normans will be hot against you after this, Bishop and Baron alike,

and the Greenwood will be the best place for you. So you shall come to me, not as a slave, but as one of my band, and your Alice shall be a companion to my own Marian.'

Marian had long ceased to comb her hair, and was sitting with her comb in her lap, listening intently to all that passed between the two men. Now she spoke. 'I shall be glad to have your lady at my side—for among all these men, I do long sometimes for another woman to talk to.'

'Thank you for your kind words, Mistress Marian,' said Alan, bowing his head. 'She will have need of kindness—she is very young, not used to the ways of the Greenwood.'

Marian laughed softly, and began to comb her hair again. 'Why, as to that, I am not yet a withered crone myself; and I too was not used to the Greenwood when I came to live in it; but I learned, and Alice will learn too.'

'Beauforest holds Kirkby Manor, does he not?' broke in Robin, glancing up at the sun, which was beginning to glint between the trees on the eastern border of the glade. 'And Kirkby is five miles from here. At what time is your Alice to be wed?'

'At noon,' replied Alan.

'Then there is no time to be lost. Wait for me here.' And turning, Robin swung himself up the steep bank, and disappeared into the dark mouth of a cave half-hidden by a great hanging curtain of wild clematis.

Alan looked uncertainly down at Marian, fidgeting from foot to foot in his eagerness to be gone. She looked up, and patted the turf beside her. 'He'll not be long. Sit down here, friend Alan A'Dale, and tell me about your lady.'

The young man hesitated for a moment, and then did as she bade him. Marian parted her hair in two, and began to braid it. 'Now,' said she, 'is she very beautiful? Is she dark or fair?'

So, almost against his will, Alan found himself talking, telling how fair Alice was, and how gentle, and how much he loved her. And Marian listened to him, and felt sorry for the poor, gentle little maid, who—if she was to be wed to the man of her choice, instead of to a cruel and wicked old tyrant—must learn to face the hardships of life in the Greenwood.

There was a sound behind and above them; the hanging curtain of wild clematis was thrust aside, and Robin Hood came leaping down into the glade. He was no longer a brown-clad forest-ranger, but the dark-skinned minstrel he had been on that day long ago when he had set out to rescue Marian. Standing beside Alan, who had sprung to his feet, he gave a curious, shrill whistle, at sound of which every head turned in his direction. Men dropped their tasks, lounging figures sprang erect, and from all parts of the glade the outlaws came running to stand before their leader.

Robin's glance moved over them, and he called to the small, bright-eyed man beside Little John. 'Peterkin lad, do I make as fine a minstrel as I did the last time you and I went to steal a lady?'

The little juggler nodded, his black eyes dancing. 'Aye, Master, you'll do well enough. And I? Do I put on my motley again?'

'No, keep your good forest brown,' answered Robin.

'It is your skill with a broadsword that I shall want this day.' And turning to the rest, he told them quickly what was in the wind. 'Lads,' he ended, 'I need

five-and-twenty of you to follow me and Alan here to Kirkby. Those of you who would come, hold up your right hands.' Instantly every right hand in the company shot up. Robin laughed. 'Good lads!' he said. 'Yet five-and-twenty is all I need, so I must make my own choice.'

Man after man stepped out from the band and fell away to form a smaller company of their own as he called their names: Little John, Peterkin, Gilbert, Watkin, Hob-o'-the-Hoar-Oak, and a score more, including a tall, yellow-haired Dane called (because of the power of his fists) Right-Hitting-Brand, who had lately joined the brotherhood.

Alan stood very still, looking into the face of each man as they came forward. Their resolute looks gave him hope, but all the time his fever of impatience was rising with the sun that crept up over the tree-tops, until he could scarcely bear the quiet orderliness of the preparations going on, as men saw to their bowstrings and made sure that their brands were loose and easy in the sheaths and collected the arrows that were issued from the fletcher's store. Yet it was only a very short while that he had to wait after all.

Will Scarlet and Much-the-Miller's-Son were left in command of the camp, greatly to their disgust; and the chosen band set out, Robin at their head, with young Alan A'Dale striding beside him, and the rest strung out in single file behind. They struck straight through the forest in the direction of Kirkby, moving swiftly and silently between the crowding trees. Not a dry leaf rustled, not a twig snapped, to tell of their going, only now and then a jay would scream its harsh defiance; or a buck rabbit would thump its warning to the forest before diving for safety in its own bury; or the grazing deer would raise startled heads, and then, as though reassured, return to their cropping of the grass.

It was still some time before noon when they came down the last wooded slope and glimpsed the brown ploughland of Kirkby Village, between the tree-trunks. On the woodshore Robin halted, and after taking a quick look at the lay of the land, turned to his followers who had silently closed up behind him.

'Follow yonder willow-plantation,' said he. 'It will bring you within half a bowshot of the church. Wait there till you hear my bugle-horn; then come to me as swiftly as you can, for there will be work for you to do.' He gripped Alan's shoulder for a moment, saying kindly: 'Never fear, we will save your lady,' and was gone, striding across the ploughland down towards the village.

In the long street people were gathering, some standing at their doorways; some were already drifting towards the little church among the lime-trees on the far side of the green. They were in holiday clothes, the men with their best hoods carefully mended, the women in their Sunday gowns, gay with ribbons, so that the whole village seemed as bright as a flower garden; but their faces were set and angry, and they whispered together as they watched the green track which led from the Manor House.

Before the door of the village alehouse, with its green bush for an inn sign, a little group were talking together in low voices.

'Ai-ee, poor lass!' said a wrinkled crone. 'This will be a sad day for her, I'm thinking!'

Mine host of the alehouse nodded gloomily. 'And they do say as her heart belongs to young Alan A'Dale, even yet!'

‘Then why doesn’t he come and save her?’ demanded a young woman fiercely.

‘How could he, you silly wench? He be almost as poor as we are. He has no men to follow him; and old Niger le Bigot be the most powerful man in these parts—which is why our poor master be giving him his daughter, as we all do know!’

But the girl only tossed her head angrily. ‘If I were the man my Lady Alice loved, I’d not sit back and see her wed to another against her will, be he never so powerful!’ she said, and received a quick smile of approval from a lean and ragged minstrel who happened to be passing by.

The minstrel went swinging up the street, not seeming to notice the gloomy faces of the serfs and villeins. Across the green he went, past the stocks and whipping-post and pillory, and so came to the churchyard gate, where half the inhabitants of the village had by now gathered, all craning their necks to look for the coming of the bride.

Propping himself comfortably against the mossy churchyard wall, Robin the Minstrel looked about him, plucking gently at his ribboned lute, and listened to the angry mutterings of the villeins. The church door was already open, and the candles lit on the altar, and once he caught a glimpse of a figure in gold-embroidered vestments as it passed between him and the light.

One of the younger villeins saw the gorgeous figure too, and muttered, with an ugly laugh: ‘My Lord the Archbishop of York! Now I wonder how much yon devil le Bigot is paying you for your help in breaking our poor little maid’s heart?’

‘Hush, lobkin!’ said a woman beside him, and craned her neck to get a view of the road. ‘She should be here soon.’

But it was the bridegroom who arrived first. He came up at a hand-canter, followed by his knights and men-at-arms, and reined in savagely at the open churchyard gate. He was an old man, with a thin grey beard that straggled out over his gay silken tunic. His face was red and blotchy: a cruel face with a sneering, savage mouth and small, malevolent eyes; and watching him, Robin thought again of the ugly tales that clung about the name of Sir Niger le Bigot.

The evil, glittering eyes of the old man swept over the crowd of humbly-gaping serfs. ‘Oafs! Clod-hoppers!’ he snarled. ‘Has the lady not arrived?’

The reeve, the chief man of the village, shook his head. ‘No, not yet, sir.’

Sir Niger sat his horse for a few moments, fuming with impatience, and then, as one of the men-at-arms came forward to take his bridle, slid stiffly to the ground. The whole party had dismounted, and now gathered round the gateway, insolently shouldering aside the villagers. They were an evil-looking crew: the young men slovenly; the older ones cruel-faced and vicious-looking. They were disposed to be merry, and laughed and jested among themselves; while their master pulled his beard and swore under his breath, fretting and fuming as the moments passed, his ugly face growing darker and more blotchy with rage and impatience.

Presently the knights began to grow bored, and one or two of them kept glancing aside at the raging old man. Someone whispered behind his hand that the bride was taking her time, or had perhaps run away to the Greenwood. Someone else laughed, and hastily swallowed his laughter as Le Bigot swung

round on him, glaring with an evil light in his eyes.

At that moment a red-faced young knight in a green surcoat chanced to catch sight of the minstrel who leaned against the churchyard wall, watching the bridegroom with grim amusement under his hood.

‘Hi! You insolent cur!’ cried the gay young sprig. ‘How dare you stand there grinning at your betters?’

‘Nay,’ replied the minstrel gently, ‘I do not grin at my betters. I only wait to sing to the bridal party, if they so wish it. I can sing you the latest songs from London Town, or ditties of my own making: songs grave or gay; songs of love or war or hunting. Shall I sing?’

‘Yes,’ said the knight. ‘Anything to pass the time. Sing, and be cursed to you!’

So Robin strummed his lute for a moment, and then raised his head and sang. It was a merry song that he chose, one that Peterkin had taught him, with a great deal of love and fighting in it, and it was well suited to his audience. When it was finished, they demanded another, and Robin bowed, shook back his dagged sleeves, and sang again.

The last notes had scarcely died away, when the crowd around the churchyard gate heard the sound of horses’ hooves in the distance. Every face turned towards the Manor road. Old Sir Niger stopped swearing, settled his rich brocade cloak on his shoulders, and wiping the evil scowl from his face, strove to look pleasant.

Round the nut-trees at the corner of the road came two riders, who turned towards them across the green. The knights doffed their velvet caps as the riders reined in before the gate, and the villeins came crowding forward, despite the angry curses of the men-at-arms, eager to show their Lady Alice that they shared with her in her grief, though there was nothing they could do to help her.

Sir Simon de Beauforest dismounted slowly. His face looked lined and heavy with grief, for he loved his daughter, and despised himself that he was too weak to save her from the wicked old man who now came forward, bowing and grimacing, to aid her from the saddle.

Watching from his place beside the mossy wall, Robin saw the lady on the second horse flinch and draw away at his approach; then she leaned forward and gave him her hand; but she never looked at him, and the moment she reached the ground, snatched her hand away, and went to stand beside her father, who looked down at her with all his shame and misery in his face.

Sir Niger looked at her with an ugly expression in his eyes, and then shrugged and turned away. ‘Flout me while you may, my lady,’ he said in a savage voice. ‘It will be *my* turn later!’

One of the knights gave a brutal laugh. The girl shrank against her father; and the face of the minstrel leaning against the wall grew suddenly very grim.

Next moment the Lady Alice had taken her father’s arm, and he was leading her in through the gate. She passed quite close to Robin, and he saw that she was beautiful in a fair and gentle way very different from Marian; but her face was drained of colour so that even her lips were white—whiter than the creamy samite of her gown and wimple—and her eyes looked blind with the tears that she was too proud to shed. Then she was gone, moving up the path towards the open church door.

Sir Niger followed, with his knights jostling at his heels. Two of the men-at-arms remained with the horses, and the rest followed their master into the church. After them crowded the villagers, and with the villagers, his lute laid aside and his fingers on the bugle-horn beneath his cloak, went Robin Hood.

Inside, the church was as gay as a dandelion flower, with its green walls painted with saints and devils, bright-winged cherubims and golden stars, and little crimson-winged angels looked down from the hammer-beams of the roof. The candles on the altar were tipped with glimmering crocus flames, shedding a soft yellow radiance on the fat archbishop who stood there with the service book open in his hands; on the sorrowful figure of Beauforest, and the trembling maiden beside him; and on the evil, grinning face of the old knight who waited for her at the altar steps.

The archbishop was beginning to read the service as Robin came in, and for an instant the outlaw waited just inside the door, listening to the greasy voice. Then, putting his horn to his lips, he winded a shrill rallying-call that set the painted roof a-ringing. As the echoes died away there was a moment of stupefied silence. Everyone craned round to see who it was that had sounded a hunting-horn in the House of God.

Old Sir Niger had whipped round, and his hand was on the jewelled hilt of his sword. Beauforest stood very still, and beside him the Lady Alice might have been a figure carved in stone, so rigid was she as she gazed down the long, dim aisle; but there was sudden, desperate hope in her eyes.

Then Robin the Minstrel stepped out from the shadows beside the door and strode up the aisle into the golden radiance of the candles. Every eye in the church followed him, and the faces of the poor villeins were suddenly hopeful and eager; but the knights and men-at-arms were fingering their weapons.

‘This is an ill match!’ said Robin very clearly, coming to a halt before the altar. ‘An evil match, and it shall not go on! The maiden shall choose for herself who she takes for bridegroom; and assuredly, old man, it will not be you!’

‘And who are you to say so?’ snarled Sir Niger.

‘I am Robin of Barnesdale, or you may have heard of me as Robin Hood,’ answered the minstrel, and flinging back his cloak from his sword-arm, drew his blade clashing from its sheath.

Next instant the old bridegroom had whipped out his sword, but he was slow with age, and his younger knights were first to come at the ragged outlaw.

With his back against the chancel wall, Robin fought them off. He knew that his own men would arrive at any moment now, and he had no fear of defeat. His swift blade flickered in the candle-light as he lunged and struck and parried, and already one man lay dead at his feet.

The fat archbishop had let forth a howl of terror and slid out through the vestry door at the first sight of naked steel. Beauforest had drawn his sword, and then, seeing that the outlaw seemed in no need of his aid, had thrust Alice clear of the fight into a place of safety between the high altar and the carved and painted tomb of his father. He would have stood between her and the fray, but with a swift movement she prevented him and stood looking on, her hands pressed to her mouth, but her eyes as bright as stars.

For one moment the villeins had seemed quite stupefied by the sudden turn things had taken, but now the menfolk began to slip from their places and come

quietly but very purposefully up the aisle, crowding in on the knights and men-at-arms before the altar. They were unarmed, but they were ready to fight with their bare hands and their wives' bodkins—aye, and die if need be—for their lady, now that they had a leader.

In another moment the battle would have joined, and it would have gone ill with the faithful villeins; but suddenly, above the noise and shouting, the trampling of mailed feet and the clash of weapons, there came a deep, musical droning as though a giant bee had entered the church; and old Sir Niger threw up his hands and fell, with a clothyard shaft quivering in his throat. Robin never glanced round; with five blades at his throat it was wiser not to.

A second arrow hummed into the back of a man-at-arms, and he pitched down on his face, arms flung wide, the shaft vibrating between his shoulder-blades. A moment later the two men-at-arms who had been left with the horses came running into the church, looking back over their shoulders as they ran. Again came the musical droning, and one of the men fell in his tracks and rolled over like a shot rabbit.

Then the doorway was full of brown-clad men blotting out the autumn sunshine, and the mail-clad figure of young Alan A'Dale was at their head. With a shout, Sir Niger's men turned to face the outlaws, and leaving Robin to himself, sped and jostled their way down the church to charge the ranks that blocked the doorway, striving desperately to break through, for they knew, every scoundrel in his black heart, that they need look for no mercy from these grim-faced men.

The forest-rangers closed up, shoulder to shoulder, their deadly blades making a leaping, many-pointed hedge of steel which the knights and men-at-arms strove wildly to beat down. Robin and the faithful villeins, some of whom were now armed with swords and daggers hastily snatched from the fallen men, hurled themselves upon them from behind, and the fight swayed savagely back and forth in the church doorway.

Then quite suddenly it was over. After the turmoil everything seemed very quiet. Several of Sir Niger's men had broken through and made their escape—for the outlaws made no attempt to give chase to those who got away. The rest lay dead in front of the altar or in the autumn sunshine before the doorway. There would be no more of the knightly hornets' nest that had made life a misery through half of Nottinghamshire. Then Robin drew a deep breath, wiped his sword on the cloak of a fallen knight, and sheathed it at his side.

The archbishop had gone. He had got out of the vestry by another door, mounted his fat horse, and ridden off at a pace that the poor brute was quite unused to. No one troubled about him when his flight was discovered; there were other and more important things to be attended to.

Several of the men were wounded. Hob-o'-the-Hoar-Oak, with a sword-thrust in the hip, was the sorest hurt, but the rest were for the most part no more than flesh-wounds and gashes. George-a-Green had taken a slash that had laid his cheek open; Gilbert was sitting with his back to a pew, staunching a deep cut between his neck and shoulder. Alan A'Dale was looking down ruefully at the long gash which had slit his leather sleeve from elbow to wrist, and from which the blood dripped down, reddening his hand.

Alice had not moved from her place beside the altar, where the womenfolk had gathered about her. She did not seem to notice when her father left her side and walked down the church to join Robin Hood. She was searching with her eyes among the outlaws round the doorway—searching for Alan; and then as he moved out into the sunlight she saw him. ‘Alan!’ she called breathlessly. ‘Alan!’

Alan looked up and saw her standing there, and began to walk rather unsteadily towards her. She drew her creamy skirts about her and came to meet him, the other women falling back to let her through; but before she reached him she swayed, and then crumpled up in a dead faint on the stone floor.

Alan sped the last few paces to kneel at her side and gather her into his arms; and the next instant Robin was beside them also.

‘Go down to your menfolk,’ he bade the crowding women. ‘There are wounds to be dressed down there, and they need your aid.’ Dropping on one knee, he turned to Alan. ‘Give her to me, lad. You should have that gash tied up.’ And he took the unconscious girl from her lover’s unwilling arms.

‘I shall do well enough,’ replied Alan.

‘No, but you will not. You are bleeding like a stuck pig. We shall have *you* swooning too, like the little maid. Go to Little John and bid him see to your wound. I will look after your lady.’

So Alan went unsteadily down the church to get his hurt seen to. In the wide doorway, Little John, ever the best surgeon in the band, was hard at work, with two or three of the younger women to help him, salving and binding up the wounds of his comrades. Clean linen and crocks of water had been brought from the nearest hovels, and one of the women had brought a little earthenware pot of salve. Hob lay full length on the churchyard path, and Little John was kneeling beside him, spreading the salve on his wound, and Alan stood quietly waiting until the tall lieutenant of the band should be free to dress his arm.

Soon the wounds of all the outlaws had been bathed and dressed, and they were sitting or lounging comfortably in the churchyard with their backs to the trunks of the lime-trees, while the villagers stood round, gaping at them in admiration.

Meanwhile, Alice had recovered, to find her father and Robin bending over her. ‘Where is Alan?’ she demanded. ‘He was here—.’

Robin aided her to sit up. ‘Alan is safe enough,’ said he. ‘He has a gash in his arm and I sent him to get it bound up. Go out to him as soon as you like, for the sight of you will do him more good than all Little John’s surgery!’

So the Lady Alice sighed, and blushed, and getting to her feet went away down the aisle with her head held very high, to join her lover in the yellow October sunshine.

Robin and her father watched her go, and then turned back to face each other.

‘I cannot find it in my heart to be sorry that this has happened,’ said Beauforest in a low voice. ‘I ever liked young Alan A’Dale, and would have given my daughter to him had I dared. But Niger le Bigot was a powerful man, and, alas! I am a weak one.’

‘And Niger le Bigot, though dead, has powerful friends,’ replied Robin; ‘so Alan must join me in the Greenwood, and the little maid also, for there will be no safety for her here, after this. Will *you* come too, and throw in your lot with me and my lads, or will you remain in your own house?’

‘I remain here,’ answered Beauforest. ‘I love my land and I love my serfs; besides, I am too old to learn new ways. So I must take my chance.’

‘Remember always that my men and I are your friends. Send for us whenever you have need of our aid, and we will come.’

‘I thank you for your promise,’ said the older man. ‘I shall remember it. And for the rest—you are right: there is no safety here for Alice, so I entrust her to young Alan and you.’

Robin nodded. ‘That is well said. And she shall be happy—I promise you that. There will be a merry wedding in the Greenwood before many days have passed; and my own Marian will be joyful to have her near her. Poor lass, she is as bold and hardy as any man, but it is lonely for a woman among a band of men without another woman to keep her company.’

So it was arranged, and before another hour had sped the little band were on the march again. Some of them rode the horses that had lately belonged to Sir Niger’s men; others went on foot as they had come. Grim old Watkin took Hob-o’-the-Hoar-Oak up before him on his saddle-bow, handling the wounded man as gently as ever a mother could handle her child; and Alice rode pillion behind Alan A’Dale, holding on to his broad leather sword-belt.

Up through the ploughland and pasture of the village they went, rather battered, rather bloody; and gaining the woodshore, they melted in among the trees.

Presently Alice began to glance about her a little fearfully into the forest shadows. She had never before been beyond the open rides of the chase, and the mazy deer-paths, thickets and gloomy dingles through which they rode seemed strange and terrible. She was a little afraid, too, of the outlaws who thronged about her; but when she looked aside into the face of the ragged minstrel who seemed to be their leader she knew that she had no need to be afraid. Besides, Alan was with her, and she would be safe anywhere with Alan.

On and on they went, down long forest-rides that seemed to have no end, through dense covers where she had to bend her head against Alan’s shoulder to shield her face from the whipping twigs. Then, as they passed beneath a giant old chestnut-tree, Robin Hood raised his head and gave an odd low whistle, which was answered by a shrill one overhead in the branches; and a few minutes later, pressing forward through a dense hazel thicket, they came out into a long glade below a sandstone scar.

Alice looked upward, and saw young trees on the crest of the scar, where the forest began again at a higher level, and the openings of several caves half hidden by the briars and rowan saplings and virgin’s bower that veiled the rough sandstone. On the smooth turf more brown-clad men were moving about or sitting beside two cooking fires. No one seemed surprised to see them; it was as though the men in the glade had known the exact moment that they would appear, and she remembered that whistle out of the branches of the chestnut-tree.

Over Alan’s shoulder, as they reined up, she saw a tall woman coming towards them over the grass—a woman in a green kirtle, who walked with a lithe, free step, and carried her head as though her coiled russet hair were a queen’s crown.

Robin had already dismounted, and now he came to Alice and lifted her down. The tall woman came up, and he touched her shoulder with a smile, saying: ‘Look, I have brought you a companion, sweetheart. Take her away and make

much of her, for she is very tired.'

Marian turned to the girl and took both her hands in her own. 'Welcome to the Greenwood, little sister,' said she. Then to Robin: 'Hob is wounded, and Diccon and George—and Alan also. Alice shall rest on my bed, and I will come back to attend to their hurts.'

'Their hurts have been attended to already,' said Robin, laughing. 'And Little John will be direly offended if you interfere with his surgery!'

'I would not offend Little John for all the world!' smiled Marian. 'So—come, Alice, we will leave these menfolk to themselves.' And putting her arm round Alice, she led her away in the direction of her own small cave.

Robin and young Alan watched them go in silence; and then the outlaw chieftain turned to his newest recruit. 'Now let us find Friar Tuck, and bid him put up the banns for your wedding. And after that—supper; for you're as hungry as myself, I'll warrant!'

Some days later there was a wedding in the glade below Dunwold Scar. Robin Hood gave the bride away, and Little John stood beside the bridegroom as his best man. The outlaws stood reverently with bared heads, and even the great ban-dogs gathered round with pricked ears and tails gently waving. And so, kneeling before Friar Tuck, with the golden leaves of the beech-trees drifting down around them, Alan A'Dale and Alice de Beauforest were made man and wife.

The Shooting for the Silver Arrow

BLUE SUMMER DUSK was deepening over the Stane Ley, and high overhead in the great trysting lime powdery-winged night-moths were already hovering among the honey-scented lime-blossom. Supper was over, and the cooking fires had been allowed to die down into red embers, for it was a hot July evening, and the outlaws who sat or sprawled around them had no need of banked-up fires to keep them warm. Robin sat beside one of the fires, with Marian at his side, and Breon, the largest of Friar Tuck's ban-dogs, lying with its head on his knee.

Marian had a puppy in her lap. Four of its brothers were sleeping cuddled against their mother among the roots of the lime-tree; but this one, the finest of the litter, Friar Tuck had given to her for her own. It had enormous paws, and a little, warm, rough tongue that was licking Marian's fingers. It was being very good just now, because it was half asleep, but since morning it had chewed its way through Alan A'Dale's best shoes, a new pair of buckler straps, and Little John's cap.

Alan had been rather put out by the loss of his shoes, but he was a good-natured lad, and had quickly got over his annoyance. Now he was standing on the edge of the fire-glow, rocking gently backwards and forwards on his heels as he strummed at a well-worn lute. He had a warm tenor voice and a knack of picking up the tune and words of a song after one hearing, so that if, as sometimes happened, a wandering minstrel came their way, after he had gone Alan could always sing his songs. But the song he was singing now was well known to all the outlaws and well loved by all—a merry lilting tune called 'The Woodstock Rose', in the refrain of which they all joined.

In the middle of the song the bushes parted at the near end of the glade, and a weary figure came forward into the firelight. Alan broke off his singing between one note and the next, and everyone turned to face the new-comer, who sat down by the fire with a blissful sigh. It was Hugh Greenleafe, one of the younger outlaws.

The boy had begged leave a few days before to go south to visit his father, a yeoman farming his own land hard by Nottingham Town, whom he had not seen since he joined the outlaw brotherhood three years before. Robin had warned him against running into trouble himself or bringing it upon his father, before letting him go; but he had been anxious about the boy none-the-less, and was very glad to see him safely back again. 'Well, Hugh,' said he, 'what of your father?'

'Well enough,' answered Hugh with a smile. 'The lambing season was good this year, and in his field-strips the wheat stands thick and heavy in the ear.'

'You were not seen by anyone except your father?' questioned Robin.

‘No, Master, I took good care of that. I came and went again under cover of the darkness, and lay close in the house during the one day that I was there. And when my father’s cronies came in to gossip over their ale in the evening, I lay hid in the apple-loft over their heads, where I could hear the talk and laughter without being seen—with a mug of ale to myself.’ He chuckled. ‘Little did they think, those respectable yeomen, that there was one more than usual in their company that night!’

‘Did they speak of anything that was interesting?’ asked old Watkin, from the other side of the fire, and another man called out: ‘Aye, tell us, Hugh lad, what was the latest talk of Nottingham?’

There was a rustling and an upheaving in the warm shadows, as men drew closer in and others came drifting across the sward from the second fire, drawn by the prospect of news.

Ket-the-Smith, who was one of the cooks for that day, had left his place as soon as Hugh arrived, and now came back, carrying a wooden platter piled high with the remains of supper. This he gave into the new-comer’s hands, saying: ‘Eat up, lad. You’ll be hungry, I reckon,’ and went back to his seat on the turf.

Hugh fell to, for he was indeed hungry, talking while he ate, telling what he had gathered from the talk of the farmers in his father’s kitchen, and other things also which his father had told him during the day they had been together. A few of the outlaws were Nottingham men, and several more came from one or other of the villages that lay close around the town; so they listened eagerly to the talk of their home countryside, as Hugh retold it between mouthfuls of cold venison. He told of births and deaths and marriages, of who had been taken for poaching the king’s red deer; of a calf with two heads which was supposed to have been born on one of the farms; of a fight in the fish-market on the last Saturday but one; and, lastly, he told of a great archery contest which the sheriff was planning, to take place on a certain day of the following week.

‘Is it open to all corners, this archery contest?’ cut in Robin, quickly.

‘Yes—and with a silver arrow barbed and flighted with good red gold, for the victor’s prize.’

‘Hugh,’ said Robin, ‘would you like to shoot for that silver arrow?’

‘That I would, Master Robin!’ Hugh replied eagerly.

Robin turned to a shadow that was taller than the rest, and asked: ‘Would *you* like to, Little John?’

‘Aye, gladly!’ exclaimed Little John.

‘Then so you shall.’ Robin looked round him at the crowding shadows of his men, and demanded gaily: ‘Who’ll come with us, lads? Who’s for Nottingham and the sheriff’s archery contest?’

‘I’ll come, Master!’ cried Much-the-Miller’s-Son.

‘I’ll come, Master Robin!’ Gilbert-of-the-White-Hand leaned forward into the firelight.

‘And I!’ added Will Scarlet.

‘I also, Master Robin!’ That was Alan A’Dale’s voice.

‘And I!’—‘And I!’—‘And I!’ All round the low fire voices answered him, laughing and eager.

‘You babes!’ said Marian’s voice out of the darkness. ‘Because you can shoot farther and straighter than the sheriff’s bowmen, you must needs be showing off

like so many foolish little children!’

Robin laughed. ‘Sweetheart, you would not begrudge us a little harmless junketing?’

‘Harmless!’ cried Marian, half-exasperated, yet half-laughing, too. ‘Harmless! And I suppose when you are all hanged in a row before the gates of Nottingham, like so many maggot-pies on a forester’s barn-door, no harm will have been done—and Alice and I may laugh and be glad because we no longer have to fear for your safety!’ Then she relented suddenly. ‘No, I did not mean that. Go and enjoy your shooting, and bring the silver arrow back with you.’

Five days later a little band of yeomen came striding blithely down the road from Worksop towards Nottingham. There were three-and-twenty of them, and they seemed a sturdy lot, clad in stout russet-cloth garments of many colours, each with a well-stocked quiver at his side, and a bowstave of red Spanish yew strapped across his shoulders. Their shoon were powdered white with the dust of the summer highway, for they had come a long distance, and all of them carried wallets or bundled kerchiefs which hinted at bread and cheese and perhaps even cold bacon.

There were many such gay companies coming down the roads and forest tracks that morning from Worksop, Mansfield, Kirkby, and Woodstock, and a score of Sherwood Forest hamlets scattered between Clumber and the Peak, all drawing inwards towards Nottingham and the sheriff’s archery contest, all eager to take home with them the coveted silver arrow.

On the smooth turf before the northern walls of Nottingham Town, the butts had been set up, with new straw targets at either end of the long green range; and all around, close under the walls and even half-blocking the gateway, were booths and stalls and sideshows, so that the scene looked for all the world like a fair. From all Nottinghamshire and the Peak District chapmen, jugglers, and wandering showmen had gathered together to sing their songs and ply their wares among the people who came to see the sheriff’s archery contest.

Robin and his men wandered through the crowds which were already gathering, looking about them with pleasure at the gay scene which was so strange to them, used as they were to the leafy solitudes of the Greenwood. Here was a red-and-yellow striped booth with brightly gilded gingerbread and peppermint lozenges for sale. Here were drinking-booths; here an open stall on which were displayed embroidered hawking-gloves and scarlet-tufted falcons’ hoods and jesses with silver swivels.

Here was a ballad-monger; there a juggler clad in green and yellow, tossing up a flickering stream of bells and balls and freshly plucked roses. There was a dancing bear, too, and a little ragged boy who piped the tune for him to dance to. The outlaws gathered to watch him, laughing at his clumsy antics, and when his dance was done, tossed down a scattering of copper coins to be gathered up by the small piper.

On they went, looking into this stall and that, stopping to listen to the ballad-monger and watch the ragged acrobat, Robin enjoying himself as much as any of them. Everywhere they came upon other bowmen come to try their skill, but these made up only a small part of the holiday crowd which filled the spaces between the booths and jostled each other around the town gates. Worthy

farmers with their apple-cheeked wives and daughters; merchants in furred gowns and their ladies in gay summer silks and satins; lean brown serfs with the soil still caked about their ankles and a few copper coins in their pockets; all had come to watch the shooting for the silver arrow, and laugh and marvel at the antics of the travelling mountebanks and buy the pretty fairings from the gay stalls. And running through and under and between the legs of the crowd were small children and large dogs—the dogs all with the centre toes of their forefeet clipped short to prevent them from chasing the king's deer.

The shooting was to start an hour before noon, and judging by the sun that it was now not far short of that time, Robin and his band began to make their way towards the butts. The smooth green stretch of turf, which had been kept clear by several foresters, lay very quiet and empty amid the gay crowd and the gaudy fairground booths which surrounded it. A stand had been set up at one side, from which the sheriff and his guests would watch the shooting. It was hung with gay crimson cloth, its rough woodwork was bravely daubed with paint and gilding, and at the front of it, supported on two forked hazel wands, was the silver arrow itself, glittering in the sunshine, with a couple of stout men-at-arms to keep watch and ward over it.

‘There it is, lads!’ said Robin. ‘And a pretty bauble, too—well worth shooting for!’ He dropped his voice to a murmur. ‘Six of you shall shoot with me, and the rest remain here in case of any mischance.’

‘Are you expecting trouble, Robin?’ asked his tall lieutenant.

Robin shook his head. ‘No, John; but it is as well to be prepared. So you shall come with me—and Much—and Gilbert—and Hugh.’ He hesitated, his glance moving over the eager faces of his band, and then finished: ‘And you, Will Scarlet—and you, Reynold.’

The space all down the long sides of the range was beginning to fill up as the first-comers left the stalls and jugglers and came to get good places from which to watch the contest. The green-clad foresters were hard put to it now to keep the smooth turf of the range clear, and Robin and his men were pushed and jostled from behind as other bowmen came thrusting through to the front.

By dint of much good-humoured shoving and free use of their elbows, the outlaws continued to keep their places in the front of the crowd, for having come all the way south from Barnesdale to see and take part in the shooting, they had no mind to be ousted into the back rows, where none of them—save perhaps Little John—would be able to see anything.

Presently the sheriff came out from the gateway with his lady on his arm, and with them several other merchants and their wives. They mounted the wooden steps to the crimson-hung stand, and settled themselves on the cushioned bench, the ladies carefully spreading out their damask skirts. The sheriff flung himself back against the cushions, folding his hands on his stomach, and turned to speak to the man at his left—a lean man who sat forward, gazing keenly about him, his face deeply shaded by his forward-drawn hood, who somehow did not look like a merchant.

The heads that had begun to poke up all along the top of the wall craned over farther than ever; the dogs that had been running among the legs of the crowd were hastily caught by their masters; small children were swung up on to their fathers' shoulders, so that they could see over the heads of the people. Then a

man-at-arms stepped out to the front of the stand, and raising a bugle-horn to his lips, blew a sharp, strident blast.

‘Those of you here who have come to shoot for the silver arrow,’ shouted he, ‘take your bows and come forward.’

Instantly the pushing and shoving began again as the bowmen thrust their way clear of the crowd and stepped out into the open range, there to be met and shepherded into a space that had been fenced off like a cattle pen, towards one end of the butts. With them went Robin, followed by his chosen six. The rest of the brotherhood remained where they were, leaning easily on their ready-strung bows, yet alert for any sign of trouble.

The bugle-horn sounded again, and the first man stepped out to shoot. He shot badly, and withdrew, crimson with confusion, before the derisive hoots of the crowd, to make way for the second bowman. This was a little wizened man, with a ragged thatch of tow-coloured hair straying out from beneath his hood; but he raised his bow and loosed with an ease that could scarcely have been bettered by one of Robin’s men; and the arrow snored away down the range to thud into the target not much more than a hand-breadth from the peg. Three times the little man loosed, and though his second and third shots were not so true as his first had been, they were still fine shots. Then he stepped aside, and went to collect his arrows, which had been plucked from the target by one of the foresters who were keeping the score.

‘That was a fine archer, John,’ Robin said in a low voice, to his lieutenant. ‘I would that we had him with us!’

‘Maybe we shall, one day, Master,’ said Little John idly, turning to look at the next man who had stepped out to shoot. But Robin was still watching the little archer as he walked away; and then he saw a strange thing, for as the man passed his own little band of bowmen, he turned his head suddenly, and hesitated, as though he were going to speak to one of them, and then continued on his way; and at the same instant Alan A’Dale looked up, saw him, and looked away again at once, but even at that distance Robin had seen the quickly hidden recognition in Alan’s face.

A man-at-arms stepped out next, stringing his bow as he did so, and he, too, shot well; but after that, for a while there was no shooting that was worth the watching.

At two hours past noon the archery ceased for a while, the crowd broke up and scattered, the richer people in search of the inns and taverns of Nottingham, the poor folk settling themselves below the town walls to stay their hunger on black bread and strong yellow cheese, and—those of them who were lucky—fat bacon.

The sheriff and his guests disappeared through the gateway, to dine on cold mutton pasties and many-coloured marchpanes among the roses in the sheriff’s garden; and sprawling on the grass below the town walls, a little removed from the rest, Robin and his band lazily talked over the shooting of the morning, while they ate their dinner.

At last the bugle-horn recalled them to the butts, and after more pushing and jostling and thrusting, when several straying dogs had been removed from the range, and a little boy who was discovered asleep in the shade of one of the targets had been returned to his mother, and the sheriff and his fine guests had

once more settled themselves upon the stand, the shooting started again.

The long, hot, summer afternoon wore away, as man after man stepped forth and loosed his three arrows. The shafts hummed drowsily as they flew down the range, and the 'thwack' of those that reached the target sounded sharply on the warm air. A brimstone butterfly danced like an enchanted primrose-petal above the heads of the crowd, and a cuckoo called softly and repeatedly from the woods over towards Linden Lea.

The shadows were already beginning to lengthen when at last the turn of the seven outlaws came to shoot. Young Gilbert went first. He loosed well and smoothly, and his third shaft struck within three-fingers of the peg. Robin nodded his approval, and Reynold took the boy's place.

Each of the outlaws shot their best that day, and Robin watched each in turn, with pride. Slim young Gilbert; square built, grizzled Reynold; Will Scarlet, jaunty in his homespun as ever he had been in velvet; small, brown, wiry Much; Hugh Greenleaf, square and ruddy; and lastly the huge, loose-limbed Little John. Each raised his bow, bent it, and loosed, all in one smoothly powerful movement; and as arrow after arrow thudded into the inner circles of the target, the onlookers pressed forward, murmuring among themselves in admiration, for never before had they seen such marksmanship as this.

Last of all, that afternoon, Robin Hood himself took his bow and moved out on to the range. Every eye was upon him as he raised his bow and nocked the arrow to his string. The bowstring hummed its deep music in his ear as he loosed; the shaft droned away down the sunlit range, to hang quivering in the target, a finger's breadth from the peg. He drew and loosed again, and his second arrow grazed the peg on the other side. An utter silence had fallen on the crowd, and they scarcely breathed as he bent the great bow for the third time. Every eye followed the flight of that third arrow as it hummed on its way, burning like a streak of fire as the sun caught it, to thud into the target. Then a roar went up from the crowd: the ladies in the stand leaned forward, clapping their hands, and even the sheriff sat up and snorted with approval. Robin had done the thing that he had done once before in that same place—he had split the peg!

The crowd had surged forward and were spilling out on to the range. Two foresters, having examined the target, went up to the stand and spoke in the sheriff's ear. The sheriff, in his turn, spoke to his lady wife, and she rose from the cushioned bench, shook out her skirts, and took up the gleaming gold and silver arrow from the place where it had rested all day.

Robin found himself being hustled towards the steps of the stand. He mounted them and dropped on one knee before the sheriff's lady, who bent forward, smiling very prettily, with the silver arrow in her hand. He looked up at her, and as he did so, the low rays of the westering sun slanted in under his hood, lighting up his lean brown face with its glare; and the man in the deep hood, who had been standing beside the sheriff, leaned forward suddenly, to stare at him with fixed intensity. Robin caught the sudden movement out of the corner of his eye, and looking round, found himself staring into the narrowed dark eyes of Guy of Gisborne, steward of the Manor of Birkencar.

For a moment the two men looked into each other's eyes, with hatred like a naked sword between them; and then Guy of Gisborne laughed exultantly, and cried out: 'You were ever a fine bowman, but I think you have loosed your last

arrow—*Robin Hood!*'

In an instant Robin had sprung to his feet and turned to leap down the steps. Behind him he heard a bellow of astonished rage from the sheriff, and the voice of his old enemy shouting to the men-at-arms to take him. At the foot of the steps he turned about to face their attack; his broadsword glittered in his hand, and he knew that his own men were closing up behind him, the six who had shot with him being quickly joined by the rest, who came thrusting through the crowd, their strung bows across their shoulders, their good blades naked in their hands.

The whole crowd was in an uproar around the outlaws, and the sheriff's men-at-arms and archers came closing in on their flanks. They withdrew steadily: a little band of grim-faced, desperate men, their broadswords biting deep. The sheriff's men dared not shoot in that crowd, and press inward as they would, they could not break through the menace of those leaping sword-blades; and the outlaws, in close formation, retreated steadily, slipping away as it were from between their fingers.

The sheriff shouted to the crowd to stand firm behind the wolfsheads and cut off their escape; but the townsfolk disliked the look of those leaping blades, and in their hearts most of the country people were in sympathy with the outlaws; and so, instead of hampering their retreat, they parted to let them through, huddling back upon each other like frightened sheep.

In a few moments more the forest-rangers were clear of the crowd, and with the men-at-arms pressing round them like hounds about their quarry and outnumbering them four to one, they sprang back and turned to run. Weaving from side to side as they ran, they sped over the turf. A flight of arrows hummed after them, but none found a mark; and the fleet-footed men of the forest were drawing steadily away from the full-fed men-at-arms.

As they ran, they slipped their bows from their shoulders, and when they turned again, two hundred yards nearer the forest, each man had an arrow nocked to his string. The deadly clothyard shafts hummed away like a flight of angry hornets, and several of the men-at-arms dropped and rolled over.

The rest came on at an increased pace, pausing to loose, and then running again. The outlaws continued to fall back in good order towards the distant forest, turning to loose their flights of deadly arrows, falling back, turning to shoot again. Several times a forester or a man-at-arms fell, but so far the outlaws were unscathed, for in a running fight of this sort, marksmanship was not so sure as it was at the butts, when men had time to draw and loose in comfort at a fixed mark. Slowly the dark rampart of the forest drew nearer, but would the little band of desperate men gain the shelter of the trees before it was too late?

A company of men-at-arms, which had split off from the rest, was perilously near to their left flank. They had few arrows left, and the forest seemed yet a long way off. Glancing to his right, Robin saw that a valley had opened close to hand, running up between the shallow hills, and little more than a bowshot from the desperate band, a small, strong-seeming castle stood squarely on the green valley floor, its grey walls rising from the sheeny-darkness of its moat, among fair gardens and the trees of a little orchard.

It was the castle of Sir Richard at Lea, and Robin knew it. He knew that there would be willingly given sanctuary for him and his men behind those walls, and

he knew also that if he claimed that sanctuary he might bring dire ruin upon Sir Richard, his friend. All this passed through his mind in an instant of time, and he turned his face resolutely back towards the forest, which seemed almost as far off as ever.

At that moment there came a deep, menacing hum, and a flight of arrows sped past and through the band of fugitives. All save two passed harmlessly, to spend themselves on the turf; but Diggery staggered, glancing down at a jagged tear in the fleshy part of his arm, and ran on; and in the same instant Little John stumbled, and, pitching forward, rolled over with an arrow through his left knee.

The rest stopped at once, and Robin was kneeling beside him almost before he had rolled over. Little John raised himself on his hands and looked down at his useless leg, and then up into Robin's eyes. His face had grown suddenly very young and solemn.

'Robin,' he said urgently, 'your dagger. Give me a swift release. Do not let me fall into the sheriff's hands.'

'Lose my lieutenant? No, John,' Robin said. He got up and, stooping, braced himself for a tremendous effort. 'Up, lad!—Gilbert, give me a hand here.'

Gilbert sprang to his aid, and a moment later Robin rose upright, braced under the weight of his friend, who lay across his shoulder.

The whole halt had taken only a few moments, and the men standing round Little John had loosed only one flight of arrows against the swiftly nearing men-at-arms; yet as Robin set off again, half the distance that they had gained from their pursuers was lost. If Little John had not been brought down they might have reached the forest, but now, with the sheriff's men close upon them, and hampered as they were by the burden of a wounded man, they could never do so.

With a shout to his men to follow, Robin turned right, and headed at a stumbling run up the valley towards that small strong castle. Now, everything depended on whether or not the drawbridge was down, whether or not those within the castle would recognize them and give them quick admittance. A very short check would be enough to bring their pursuers up with them—and they were outnumbered four to one. Breathlessly, Robin called to Alan A'Dale. 'Alan, run—the drawbridge!'

Alan sprang forward without a word, and went speeding ahead. He was the swiftest runner of them all, and would, of course, be recognized by his father's men-at-arms.

Robin held doggedly on, hampered and slowed down by the weight of the wounded man across his shoulders. His men closed up round him, and above the thudding of their footsteps on the bridle-path, and the deep thrum of their bowstrings as they turned and loosed, he heard the sound of the pursuit drawing steadily nearer.

Little John heard it too, and demanded urgently: 'Set me down, Robin! I shall be the death of all of you—better one than all!'

'Be quiet, you fool!' Robin gasped, and ploughed on. The blood was drumming in his ears, and he swayed as he ran; but the castle was very near now, and as he rounded the last corner of the track and came in full view of the gateway he saw that it was clear and open, though men-at-arms stood ready at the drawbridge chains. And on the drawbridge stood Alan A'Dale, with the familiar grey-mailed figure of his father beside him.

At the sight, Robin's men set up a shout which was echoed by an enraged yell from their pursuers. Not a score of yards from the drawbridge, the outlaws turned to loose their last arrows before they ran on again. The drawbridge rang hollow beneath their feet, and almost before the last man was across, with a shrill grinding of chains, it began to rise.

Then Robin was standing in the outer bailey of the castle, and Sir Richard at Lea was easing the weight of Little John from his shoulders. Scarlet ran to his aid, and between them they laid the wounded man on the cobbles, taking care not to jar his injured knee. But Little John was past feeling any pain: he had quietly fainted as Robin carried him across the drawbridge.

Behind them the bridge rose higher and higher, chains screeching and pivots rumbling; and beyond it, on the farther side of the moat, they could hear the angry shouts of the sheriff's men.

In the quiet, evening-shadowed bailey of the castle, Sir Richard's men-at-arms and the panting outlaws stood and looked at each other. Then out from the doorway of the bower stairway came a tall woman in a gown of faded golden damask. She halted and looked at each of the outlaws in turn, questioningly. Forth from among his comrades stepped Alan A'Dale, saying: 'Mother—don't you know me?' and took her in a fierce hug.

She held him off, half laughing but near to tears, and looked at him. 'Know you?' she exclaimed. 'You have grown since I saw you last, little son of mine, but I knew you. Yes, and so did Diccon. He saw you at the butts this morning, and came back and told us that you were there.'

'Aye.' Sir Richard turned to Robin, who was kneeling over his wounded lieutenant. 'He told us Alan was with a party of bowmen, and I guessed the rest; so I had a watch kept and the drawbridge manned, lest you should run into trouble, being young and—foolish—and have need of sanctuary.'

'And it is as well for us that you did so,' said Robin, looking up from his examination of Little John's wound; 'for being young and—foolish—we ran into trouble, as you see.'

The drawbridge had been slammed into place and made secure; and very clearly in the new silence they heard the enraged shouting of the pursuers, balked of their prey. Nobody paid any attention to them.

Diggery was sitting on a bench in the guard-room doorway, while a grey-haired man-at-arms bent over him, examining the wound in his arm; and the little wizened archer of the morning had come up to Alan, and was wringing him by the hand and smiling all over his weather-wrinkled face, while he exclaimed over and over again: 'Aye-e, Master Alan, but I be that glad to see you home again!'

Little John had been carried into the great hall and laid on a low bench before the fire. He was beginning to revive, and as he stirred and tried to sit up, Robin bent over him, pressing him back with a gentle hand, saying: 'Lie still, old lad.'

Sir Richard, standing at the foot of the bench, asked: 'Will you cut out the barb, or shall I?'

'I will do it,' replied Robin, 'if your lady will bring me warm water and fresh linen.'

The Lady Elizabeth, Sir Richard's wife, had followed them into the hall and was standing beside him. 'I will bring them at once,' she said, and turning,

disappeared into the shadows, while Robin drew his knife and bent to cut away the blood-soaked cloth of Little John's hose from around the place where the arrow-shaft was embedded in his knee.

In a few moments the lady of the castle was back, with a bowl and ewer in her hands and clean white bandage-linen folded across her arm. Then Robin set to work; and Little John lay very stiff and rigid while Sir Richard steadied his knee, watching the sure movements of Robin's hands as he cut out the torturing barb.

The operation was but half completed when young Alan, who had remained with the rest of the outlaw band in the guard-room, came into the hall and up to his father. 'The sheriff has come up, sir,' said he, 'and he is dancing and bellowing with rage on the farther side of the moat. He demands that you deliver up to him the wolfsheds you are unlawfully sheltering.'

'Does he so?' said Sir Richard. 'Then I had better go out to the ramparts and speak with the fellow, before he bellows himself into a fit of apoplexy! Alan, come here and take my place: see, hold the leg steady—thus.'

Alan came round the bench and did as he was bid, and Sir Richard strode from the hall.

Standing on the farther bank of the moat the sheriff was shaking both fists in the air and shouting lustily, demanding that Sir Richard should come out to him, while Guy of Gisborne stood beside him, as silent as the sheriff was noisy. Then the head and shoulders of Sir Richard appeared over the wall of the archers' gallery, close beside the gatehouse; and the sheriff redoubled his shouting. 'Traitor! Caitiff!' bellowed he. 'You have a score or more of desperate robbers within your walls—villains and cut-throats all! I charge you now, yield them up to me within the hour, if you do not wish to hang beside them!'

'I am no traitor, but a loyal knight to the king, as you well know!' shouted back Sir Richard. 'And it's sick at heart the king would be, if he could know how his brother misrules in his absence! I do not deliver up to you a single one of the men now sheltering within my walls.'

While the sheriff was yet spluttering with rage at this reply, Guy of Gisborne cut in smoothly: 'Perhaps you do not know that the leader of these men is the notorious Robin Hood himself?'

'I know it well enough,' replied Sir Richard. 'Have you anything else to say?'

'Nothing, my friend, save that the day may come when you will bitterly regret your refusal!'

The sheriff struck in again: 'If you do not deliver up these men, we shall lay siege to this castle, and have them out by force!'

Sir Richard leaned farther out over the coping of the rampart, shaking his head and smiling gently. 'It is not lawful for such as you to lay siege to a knight in his own castle, and well you know it!' said he. 'Send to the king's brother for the Royal Warrant, if you like; and in the meantime I bid you good-night!' And he stepped back and was at once hidden from view by the rampart wall.

On the farther side of the moat, the sheriff and his men stared at each other blankly, while Guy of Gisborne gnawed at his lower lip and frowned blackly at the walls of the castle. They knew that what Sir Richard had said was true. It was unlawful for anyone not holding the Royal Warrant to lay siege to a knight in his own castle, and they dared not risk bringing down upon themselves the wrath of John, the king's brother, who was ruling the country so harshly during Richard

Cœur-de-Lion's absence on the Crusades. They could send and beg the Royal Warrant, to be sure, but long before it could be granted, the outlaws would be safe in their forest stronghold again.

Then Guy of Gisborne shrugged his shoulders with an ugly laugh, and putting his hand on the shoulder of the enraged sheriff, drew him away. As they moved off, with their disappointed men-at-arms and foresters trailing sulkily behind them, the heads of the sheriff and the manor steward were very close together, as though already they were hatching some evil plot between them.

The great hall of the castle showed a merry scene that night. Torches flared in their iron sconces against the walls, and on the open hearth a fire of spitting pine logs sent its red and yellow many-tongued flames leaping half-way to the dim roof. All down the long tables the forest rangers sat among Sir Richard's men-at-arms, supping right royally, and drinking deep of the nut-brown ale which stood in leather jacks ready to their hands.

At the high table across the far end of the hall sat Robin, between Sir Richard and his lady, and with them Alan A'Dale, and Sir Richard's squire, a pleasant, dark-eyed lad named Simon D'Aubernoun. Little John sat at the high table also, by right of being Robin's lieutenant; he sat sideways on the bench with his wounded leg stretched out before him, and he was weak from loss of blood, his usually brown face very white in the torchlight, and though he looked about him gaily, laughing often at some jest of the young squire who sat beside him, he did little justice to his supper, for he was feeling sick and ill with pain.

Robin seemed as merry as any man in Sir Richard's hall that night, but in his heart he was anxious and ill-at-ease; and presently, seeing the Lady Elizabeth deep in converse with her son and not likely to overhear him, he turned to Sir Richard, saying: 'I wish that I and my men were not under your roof to-night, for I very much fear that your sheltering of such as we will bring trouble upon you.'

'If it should be so,' said Sir Richard, gravely, 'it cannot be helped—and who has a better right to give you aid and shelter than I, who am your friend?'

'True. But I have no wish to bring ruin upon my friend. And indeed, I would not have led my wolfpack to your gate, but would have held on towards the forest, which is a more fitting sanctuary for such as we, if Little John had not taken an arrow in his knee.'

'You could never have gained the forest, with that young giant to carry,' said Sir Richard, glancing down the table to where Little John sat with his platter of food untouched before him. 'You did the only thing that there was to do; and if trouble should come of it, I shall bear it gladly, for your sake, friend Robin. And if the worse befalls, I can always follow Alan's example and join myself to you in the Greenwood.'

'And what of your lady wife?' questioned Robin.

Sir Richard smiled. 'You have already two ladies in your band. Could you not make room for a third?'

'Willingly!' replied Robin. 'But nevertheless, I and my lads quit your roof to-morrow, for the longer we remain here, the greater will be your danger.'

And in that determination he remained firm, despite all that the good Sir Richard and his lady could say to make him change his mind.

The Rescue of Sir Richard

ON THE MORNING after the shooting for the Silver Arrow, Little John was flushed and restless, and when Robin examined his wound it was red and angry.

They were in the great hall of the castle, where, after the custom of those days, everybody but the Lord and Lady of the house had spent the night wrapped in coarse rugs and coverlids upon the deeply rush-strewn floor, with the dogs curled up among them.

Preparations for the morning meal were going on, but save for the hurrying servants, who were setting out horn beakers and platters of crusty bread upon the long tables, there were few people about; for the men-at-arms had scattered to their various tasks and duties, and most of the outlaws had gone with them, preferring to be out-of-doors on such a beautiful morning.

‘An ugly wound, lad,’ said Robin, frowning. ‘And it must be sorely painful.’

‘Aye, it’s a bit sharp,’ agreed Little John, catching his breath as Robin dipped a wad of linen into the bowl of water beside him, and began to clean the wound.

Sir Richard had come quietly into the hall, and halted beside the wounded man. ‘Here’s an end to your fine plan of leaving my roof this day—or for several days to come,’ he said quietly.

Robin looked up, blinking as the sunlight, slanting down through a nearby lancet window, shone into his eyes and dazzled him. ‘No, my friend, the lad will do well enough in our own stronghold.’

‘And how will you get him there?’

‘Why,’ said Robin, smiling, ‘Little John is a trifle large and heavy, to be sure, but he is not so heavy that four of us cannot carry him on a litter.’

And in a litter of freshly cut green branches, with Scarlet and Brand, Gilbert and Robin Hood for his litter-bearers, Little John was presently carried forth from the castle of Linden Lea. Sir Richard and his lady had done their best to prevail upon Robin to stay with them at least until Little John’s fever was passed; but the outlaw leader was resolved to rid the castle of his dangerous presence as soon as might be, and he remained firm in his resolve.

The sun was rising high above the ramparts when the outlaw band, with Little John lying very flat and long on his litter, went down through the rose-garden of the castle to the narrow track which led towards the nearest arm of the forest.

As they crossed the open country between castle and woodshore, they kept a keen look-out for any sign of the sheriff’s men, but not a human creature did they see, save a whistling villein driving a heavy plough behind a team of eight oxen, who turned to gape and grin at them as they passed; and soon the shelter of the forest was gained, and the tree-boles rose all around them. Deeper and deeper they struck into the heart of Clumber Forest, travelling at a steady wolf-

lope, and stopping every now and then to change litter bearers, for it was close and breathless in the forest, where the thick canopy of branches shut out the air as well as the sunshine.

Towards evening they came out into the wide glade below Dunwold Scar, and Alan, Reynold, Hugh, and Will Stukely, who were carrying Little John, set their burden down thankfully beside the scar of the old cooking fire, and mopped their brows. The fire-scar was fresh and dark, and there was dry wood ready to hand, for the outlaws had slept in their winter quarters on the night before the sheriff's archery contest, and had meant to return there on their way north to Barnesdale. So a fire was quickly kindled, and coarse flour and salt meat fetched from their hidden store, and the cooks set to work. Twilight deepened to dusk, and the full golden moon of summer lifted above the tree-tops and shone down upon the leaping flames of the camp fire and the men who sat around it with their bows beside them.

The outlaws had exchanged their many-coloured homespun for well-worn Lincoln green; they had supped on broiled salt venison and little hot wheaten cakes, and now they were enjoying the quiet hour before it was time to crawl into the dry ferny bedding in the caves above them, and sleep.

Little John sat with his back comfortably propped against the sloping turf-bank, staring rather hazily at the moon; while beside him, Robin sat forward, hands locked round updrawn knees, gazing into the fire.

The rest were talking idly among themselves, talking over the happenings of the day before, making plans for future days in Barnesdale Forest. Diggery fidgeted from time to time with the bandage on his arm. Will Scarlet had produced a battered dice box, and he and Goldsbrough were dicing against each other with chips of birch bark for the stakes.

Presently Much got up, yawning and stretching, and climbed up into the mouth of the nearest cave. Little by little, others followed him. Robin and Will Scarlet lifted Little John between them, and carrying him into the cave, set him down on a pile of dry fern.

The embers of the camp fire died down into grey ash, and all was quiet in the broad glade below Dunwold Scar.

Next morning Gilbert set off northward through the forest to carry news of the shooting party to the rest of the band; and after he had gone the camp at Dunwold Scar settled down to wait until Little John's wound should be well enough for him to travel. And it seemed that they might have a long wait before them.

For several days Little John was direly sick, and lay in a high fever, tossing restlessly on his bed of fern, while Robin nursed him as tenderly as any woman could have done, and Much and Scarlet were never far from his side. And when at last the fever left him, he was, as he said with disgust, as weak as a half-drowned rabbit.

More than a week after the shooting for the Silver Arrow, the outlaw band was gathered in Dunwold Glade waiting for supper. It was yet early in the evening, and there were several hours of daylight left; but they had hunted the day before and had no need to hunt again until the morrow; nor did they need, just then, to hold up any rich traveller for his gold or gear; and it was a close, steamy day,

with thunder in the air—the sort of day when it is pleasanter to stay quiet than to move about. So any travellers that there were passed unmolested up and down the long straight road from Nottingham to Doncaster, and below Dunwold Scar the wood-rangers sprawled on the warm turf, many of them clad only in a rough kilt belted round the middle with a raw-hide strap.

The hum of a myriad insects filled the close air beneath the trees, and the little, green and bronze grasshoppers chirred ceaselessly among the grass-stems. The outlaws were feeling too blissfully lazy even to think. Little John lay flat on his back under a young birch tree that had rooted itself on the very threshold of the main cave, staring up at the pattern of the leaves against the blue summer sky, and whistling sleepily. Much and Scarlet had caught two grasshoppers and were having a race with them. Sometimes a man would slap at a stinging horsefly, or roll over to make himself even more comfortable than before. Very occasionally the cooks for the day bestirred themselves to attend to the venison stew. Nothing else moved or sounded in the broad glade.

Then, in the warm silence there sounded sharply the cry of a young tawny owl early at his hunting. Instantly everyone was listening. Reynold was on guard-duty beyond the hazel scrub that closed the end of the glade, and it was his signal that they had heard. Someone was coming.

Robin raised his head from his arms and gave an answering cry—‘Kee-wik, kee-wik.’ Then he sat up, and getting quickly to his feet, stood listening for the next signal. There was a moment’s pause, and then the rap of a woodpecker hammering on a tree bole. Two raps, it gave; no more. That meant two people. Robin gave a low whistle with an odd shake at the end, which meant ‘Let them pass.’

All over the glade men were bestirring themselves, scrambling up and reaching their bows. The drowsy peace of the evening was broken, and everyone was wide awake and on the alert for whatever might happen.

Between the boles of the oak trees showed the blue flicker of a woman’s dress and the white mane of a palfrey; and the next moment out into the glade rode Sir Richard’s wife, the Lady Elizabeth, with Diccon the archer loping along at her stirrup. She glanced about her swiftly at the green-clad figures of the outlaws, and seeing Robin, urged her palfrey towards him in frantic haste.

He strode forward to aid her to dismount, and scarcely waiting for his steadying hand, she slid down from the saddle and turned towards him with a gesture of entreaty.

‘Oh, thanks be to Our Lady you have not gone north!’ she cried. ‘Robin Hood, if you are my husband’s true friend, save him from the scaffold!’

‘The scaffold?’ exclaimed Robin. ‘That is an ill word, Madam. What has happened?’

‘After you left us, we went to our hunting lodge at Woodstock, my husband and I,’ said she, speaking low and hurriedly. ‘The sheriff must have followed us, biding his time. May he burn for it, though he *is* but the creature of the accursed monks and the robber barons that the king’s brother has let loose on the land! This evening, as my husband was hawking by the river, and Simon D’Aubernoun with him, the sheriff and his men came out of the chase and called to him to surrender to them. I saw it all from the window of my bower; it was over in a moment, though Simon felled two of the men before his hands were

bound; and he and my lord were taken captive and borne off towards Nottingham. And as soon as they were gone, I came to you—Diccon knew the way—to beg you to save my husband; for indeed he will find no mercy at the hands of those devils, and would ask for none!’

A savage exclamation made Robin look round quickly, and Alan was standing beside him, his eyes very bright in a bleak grey face. ‘Steady, lad,’ Robin said quickly, and turned back to the Lady Elizabeth. ‘How long since did this happen?’ he demanded. His own face had grown very grim, and he was tightening his belt as he spoke.

‘Scarcely two hours ago. They can only be five or six miles on their way as yet.’

Robin nodded, and spoke to his men, who had gathered round him. ‘Get your bows, lads, broadswords and bucklers. Much, see to the issue of arrows. We march for Clumber Forest at once!’

Instantly there began an ordered hurrying to and fro, as men collected their weapons and pulled on their discarded tunics. Alan lingered a moment to touch his mother’s hand, and then strode away to collect his issue of clothyard arrows. Under his birch tree Little John was sitting bolt upright and staring gloomily in front of him; for he dearly loved a fight, and it was hard to miss this one. Robin glanced at him with understanding and then turned back to the Lady Elizabeth, who stood with hands clasped, eagerly watching the preparations as they went forward.

‘Madam,’ said Robin, ‘will you go home again now, or will you wait here until we return? You will be safe enough here in Dunwold Scar, with the caves for your shelter should the need arise—safer than in Woodstock, maybe.’

‘I will wait here,’ she replied hurriedly. ‘I could not endure to go home until I know that my husband is safe.’

‘Then here is soft turf and a cool shade for your comfort, and Little John to bear you company.’ And holding out his hand to her, Robin led her across the glade to the side of the wounded outlaw, who, unable to rise by reason of his wound, and having no cap to doff, bent his yellow head to her in all courtesy.

Diccon had looped the palfrey’s bridle over a low-hanging branch, and now came after Robin, saying respectfully: ‘Master, I be wanting clothyard arrows. There be only deer-bolts in my quiver, for I had no time to fetch others before we set out.’

Robin looked down at the little man. ‘Are you coming with us then? But what says your mistress to that?’

Diccon turned his head to look pleadingly at the Lady Elizabeth, who nodded, saying: ‘Go with Master Robin.’

‘Go to Much-the-Miller’s-Son, over yonder,’ Robin said; ‘and he will fit you out with all you need.’

Almost before the words were out of Robin’s mouth Diccon was off in hot haste towards the little brown wood-ranger who stood in the mouth of the store cave issuing the deadly clothyard shafts to the men who thronged about him.

Robin bent his head courteously to Sir Richard’s Lady. ‘Keep a good heart, Madam,’ said he gently. ‘We will bring your husband safely back to you.’ He turned away and went to join his men.

Will-the-Bowman had found time to stable the palfrey, and all was ready. A few moments later the broad glade was empty; four-and-twenty men had sunk into the green gloaming of the forest, as though they had never existed.

For a long moment the lady stood still, gazing at the place where they had disappeared; then she gave a long, quivering sigh, and gathering the blue folds of her skirts close about her, sank down upon the bank.

‘Will they save my husband?’ she asked desperately.

Little John, who had also been gazing—rather wistfully—after the rest of the band, turned to her, saying simply: ‘Robin promised to save your husband. I have never known him fail in a promise.’

The outlaw band pressed southward with all speed, travelling in single file. The heat of the day was passing, and the creatures of the wild that had slept through the long hot hours were beginning to wake and go about their business in the cool of the evening. In the open glades, deer cropped contentedly at the short turf, springing away at the approach of the passing humans, and returning to their cropping again two minutes later, as peacefully as before. There was a ceaseless fluttering of small birds among the upper branches; and far and near, all across broad Sherwood, blackbird and thrush carolled their evening hymns in the upper sunshine, while in the cool shade among the tree-trunks squirrels lilted from branch to branch, and rabbits thumped and scampered on the turf.

And through all this busy life of the forest went Robin Hood and his outlaw band, heading for the Nottingham road, south of Worksop.

It was still broad daylight in the clearings when they passed from the chestnut trees of Southern Sherwood into the great oaks of Clumber Forest, but in the narrow rides it was dusk already; it was never daylight there, even at high noon. So closely did the huge oak trees stand together (oaks that were old when the Roman Legions paved their long road through the forest and called it Irming Street) and so heavy were the layers of interlacing branches overhead, that the sunshine never reached the forest floor, save here and there in single flakes and lances of gold; and there was no sound save the droning of insects, for few birds made their homes in that part of Clumber Forest.

The outlaws were nearing the end of their journey now, and they moved cautiously, for they were not far from the edge of the forest. Their feet made no sound on the cushiony moss with which the ground was covered, and they might have been four-and-twenty ghosts as they passed in utter silence between the crowding tree-trunks. On they went, swift and silent, threading the dark forest ways, and came at last to the edge of the Nottingham road. Here, among the dense scrub of hazel, dogwood, and wayfaring-trees that bordered the steep grass verge, they halted and stood waiting.

Robin slipped down through the scrub on to the open verge, and stood looking northward, where the dusty highway wound like a white ribbon through the forest towards Worksop. The sun was down behind the forest trees, and the road was in shadow; but here and there, wherever there was a gap between the branches, the sunset light streamed through and lay in bars of gold across the dust of the highway.

Robin glanced up, judging the angle of the sun. It would be some while yet, in all likelihood, before the sheriff and his men reached the ambush that awaited them, and he was wondering if there would be enough daylight left for shooting

—should shooting be necessary. Sword-play would need less light. There was an hour of shooting-light left, he judged, and that should suffice. Turning, he scrambled up the bank again.

Among the hazel-scrub the outlaws and Diccon were waiting. ‘Twenty paces farther down the road, lads,’ Robin said. ‘The scrub gives closer cover there, and ’tis a better place than this, by the look of it.’

Silently they followed him to the place of vantage which his quick eye had picked out from the roadway. The road curved slightly here, and the hidden men would be facing a little north, and so have a better command of the highway down which the sheriff and his men would presently come; also, as Robin had said, the scrub grew right down to the edge of the road in a tangled buttress of nut-trees and wild guelder rose which shielded them from the eye of anyone who came down the road, while leaving their own view clear. It was a place very well fitting to their purpose.

The wood-rangers settled themselves comfortably, sitting with their bows ready strung beside them in case of need, although, if all went according to plan, Robin alone would use the bow, while the rest did what must be done with the broadsword; and every man had his naked blade across his knees. Robin squatted down among them, and slipping the bowstave from his shoulders, bent it across his knee and slid the silken bowstring into place.

For a while they waited. Diccon shifted impatiently from knee to knee, but nobody else moved as the long minutes passed; they had lived long enough in the Greenwood to learn patience from the wild creatures.

Presently a faint sound broke the evening stillness. Much-the-Miller’s-Son was the first to hear it. He listened for a moment with his head on one side, then nodded and got silently to his feet. Soon everyone could hear it—the clip-clop of a horse’s hooves and the confused sound of many feet. A band of men was coming down the Worksop road.

The tramping drew nearer, and parting the branches of the wayfaring-tree at his left hand, Robin saw a score of men-at-arms rounding the corner of the road and coming on towards him, with the sheriff on a grey horse at their head. In the front rank of the men-at-arms, with his hands bound behind him, walked Sir Richard-at-Lea between two men with drawn broadswords.

At the sight, Robin’s face became set and grim. Very gently he let the branches of the wayfaring-tree sway back into place, and taking up an arrow, nocked it to his bowstring. Glancing down the long line of the ambush, he saw every man poised to spring, sword in hand, alert and eager-eyed. Their bows lay ready at their feet, each with an arrow sticking barb down in the turf beside it, ready to hand in case of need. There was no need for him to give last-minute orders: every man knew what he was to do when the moment for action came.

The tramping was almost upon them now, but still they waited, Robin with the drawn bowstring tingling between his thumb and forefinger. Flickering nearer and nearer through the leaves, he watched the sheriff’s grey horse and black gown, until the rider was almost level with him on the road below; then he loosed. The twang of the released bowstring sounded very loud and menacing, and the clothyard shaft snored down from the forest verge, to strike the ground with a sharp thud and stand quivering in the dust of the highway, under the very nose of the sheriff’s horse.

Instantly a great uproar broke out on the quiet road. The startled horse was rearing and plunging, wild-eyed and snorting with terror, the swearing sheriff clinging to his mane and saddle-bow. The men-at-arms had halted, and were searching the forest shadows with startled eyes; and the captive had wrenched himself round in the grip of the two men who held him, and with desperate hope in his eyes was staring in the direction from which the arrow had come.

Then down from the tangled hazel scrub sprang Robin of Barnesdale, with his forest-rangers at his back.

‘Master Sheriff,’ said he, ‘you have two prisoners whom I count as friends. Give them up to me now, and no harm shall come to you.’

‘Wolfshead! Cut-throat! Out of my way!’ mouthed the furious sheriff, and dragging his heavy sword from its scabbard, he shouted to his men to close around the prisoners; then, wheeling his still terrified horse, he made as though to ride down the tall outlaw chief who barred his way.

Robin watched him coming with a grim smile, his own blade gleaming in his hand. The next instant the grey horse was almost a-top of him; the two swords rang sharply together, hissing and grinding; then Robin sprang in under the other man’s guard, his blade flashed forward and up, and the Sheriff of Nottingham flung up his arms, and crashing to the ground, lay still.

Robin stood for a moment looking down at the fallen man. He would not have slain the sheriff for any wrong done to himself, but a wrong done to a friend was another matter. Then he walked over to the trembling horse, and after looping its bridle over a branch, turned to the fight which was now raging between the outlaws and men-at-arms.

Sir Richard, his hands still bound behind him, had staggered clear of the fight, and the next moment another bound figure burst from a knot of men-at-arms and came reeling across the road, wrenching and straining at the cords about his wrists. It was the young squire.

Robin went straight past them, his sword ready in his hand, and hurled himself into the fray. But the fighting was nearly over; the heart was gone out of the sheriff’s men now that their master had fallen, and already some of them were dropping out of the fight and slinking off into the forest. Soon the rest of them flung down their weapons in token of surrender, and in a short while all was over. The outlaws drew off, and stood breathing quickly, their swords still in their hands, staring at the men-at-arms, who stared sullenly back at them.

Several of the sheriff’s men were wounded: one writhed in the dust with a gaping wound in his thigh; another sat up, staunching the gash in his shoulder as best he could; a third had his head laid open from temple to chin and lay unconscious in a crumpled heap. More of the men had lesser wounds, and indeed there were few who had come through the struggle quite unscathed; yet no one save the sheriff had been slain, for the resistance had been half-hearted, and the outlaws had fought to disable, not to kill.

Robin left his men on guard over their beaten foe and strode across to Sir Richard, who, with his squire beside him, was still straining at his bonds. The outlaw drew the long Irish hunting knife from his belt and cut the cords that bound their wrists.

‘Thanks, Master Outlaw,’ said Simon D’Aubernoun, as his bonds fell away, and he began to chafe the red scars on his wrists.

Sir Richard set his hands on Robin's shoulders and looked him levelly in the eyes. 'Robin, my friend,' said he, 'what can I say to you in thanks for this day's work?'

'Say nothing,' Robin answered him. 'But come back with me now to Dunwold Scar. Your lady waits for you there, and it will have been an anxious waiting time for her.'

'She came to you, then?' said Sir Richard, turning to walk beside the outlaw captain as he went back towards his own men.

'Aye, she came,' replied Robin.

Alan stepped out from among his comrades, and came to wring his father's hand in gladness. Robin left them together, and turned to the dispirited men-at-arms.

'Raise your hands. Keep them raised. Let no man make any move,' said he, sternly. Then, to his own men: 'Scarlet, Gilbert, Goldsbrough, Much, Will—fetch your bows.' He waited as the five men sped back to where they had left their longbows, and returned with shafts ready nocked to their bowstrings. 'Keep them covered, and shoot any man who moves,' Robin said quickly. 'All the rest of you—take their weapons from them. Leave them not so much as a bodkin, lads.'

He stood looking on with a grim smile as the wood-rangers went among the crestfallen men-at-arms, picking up broadswords and bucklers from the trampled dust, slipping daggers from their owners' belts. Soon there was a pile of weapons on the grassy verge, and the sheriff's men, whole and wounded alike, were quite unarmed.

'Now,' said Robin, 'those of you who are unscathed, take up your damaged comrades, and get you gone back to Nottingham. Carry the sheriff back with you if it pleases you, or leave him to be found by the next traveller—it matters not to me.'

Hurriedly and in silence the men-at-arms gathered up such of their wounded comrades who could not walk. Hurriedly, two of them picked up the sheriff's body, and without a backward glance, with no desire save to be gone as quickly as possible, like the beaten curs they were, they set off down the road.

Behind them the outlaws stood, arrows still nocked to bowstrings, watching their retreat until the last of them had passed from sight round the bend of the road some half-mile away.

Then Diccon came thrusting through the bowmen, to put his hands between Sir Richard's once more, almost blubbing with relief; and the young squire turned to Robin, with his slow smile, saying: 'My thanks are due to you, Master Robin—for I also had no wish to hang before the gates of Nottingham Town!'

'Why, it is not a pleasant fate, to hang, as I have heard tell,' said Robin, and he laughed. 'But come, let us not stand here on the road, for dusk is not far off, and we must make haste or supper will be spoiled before we get home!'

So bows were unstrung, the bridle of the sheriff's horse was freed from the branch over which it had been looped; captured weapons were collected; and the whole band scrambled up through the hazel-scrub of the verge and disappeared into the forest. Robin led the way, with Sir Richard beside him; Alan A'Dale and Simon the Squire followed with the rest of the band, and Will-the-Bowman brought up the rear, leading the grey horse and whispering soft endearments into

its twitching ear.

The light had been thickening on the open road before they left it, and dusk came upon them before they had gone more than a mile or so. The blue dusk deepened to darkness, and between the tree-tops, whenever they were far enough apart to let the sky through, the stars pricked out, faintly veiled by thundery cloud-rack.

It was full darkness when at last they came close to Dunwold Scar and saw the red flicker of firelight through the trees. Robin gave a low whistle, and was answered by a whistle so like his own that it might have been an echo; and pressing through the dense scrub that edged the glade, they came out on to the open turf. The cooking fire blazed cheerfully, the gilded smoke rolling upwards towards the stars; and beside it, his face turned towards the shadows which still hid Robin and his band, sat Little John, still holding the wheaten cake he had just taken from the hot ashes. The Lady Elizabeth stood over the stewpot; she had been stirring the savoury-smelling stew, and still held the spoon; and her head was up and her eyes wide as she stared eagerly towards the sounds of the advancing outlaw band.

As they came out on to the glade, Robin called to her blithely: 'Here is your husband, Madam; we have him safe and sound.'

She flung down the spoon with a little joyous cry, at the same moment as Little John, finding the wheaten cake burning his fingers, dropped it hastily on to the grass. She kilted up her skirts and came running, to fling herself into Sir Richard's arms; then, a few moments later, drew herself away, to catch Robin's hand and raise it to her lips.

'Oh! Master Robin!' cried she. 'How may I ever thank you? But indeed and indeed I will speak your name in my prayers as long as I live.'

Robin shook his head. 'Nay, Madam,' said he, gently, 'there is no need to thank me. Pray for me if you will, and I shall be the better for your prayers. But now—supper smells sweet, and we are six-and-twenty very hungry men!'

She turned away at once towards the pot, exclaiming between tears and laughter: 'It has been ready this hour and more, and Little John and I have been hard put to it to keep the stew from spoiling; so come, all of you, and eat it up before it is burned to a cinder and the good pot ruined.'

So, laughing and merry, the party settled themselves round the fire. Robin folded up his long legs and sat himself down beside Little John, who looked round with a broad, slow smile, and a 'How now, Master?'

'Twas a goodly fight, John,' replied Robin. 'But I sorely missed you beside me. You must get that leg of yours well before we have another!'

Will-the-Bowman returned a little later from stabling the sheriff's horse, and sat down also. The rich stew was ladled out into well-worn cherry-wood bowls, and everyone set to work, for they were very hungry, one and all.

When the meal was over, and greasy fingers wiped on the grass, and the outlaws had settled down to enjoy the pleasant evening hour, Robin turned to Sir Richard, who, with his lady beside him, was sitting nearby, and said: 'Now, friend Richard, as to your future?'

The knight shrugged his shoulders. 'That is in *your* hands,' said he.

'The barons will be hot against you for the crime of aiding a notorious band of wolfsheads,' said Robin, with a wry smile. 'And soon there will be a new sheriff

of Nottingham, out for your blood as well as mine. You must come to the Greenwood, Richard—there is no help for it.’

‘And for myself nothing would please me better,’ replied Sir Richard.

‘And for your lady wife?’

The Lady Elizabeth slipped her hand into Sir Richard’s brown palm. ‘I go where my husband goes—gladly,’ said she, in a voice that was very soft.

‘That is well said, My Lady,’ said Robin, and turned to the little tow-haired archer: ‘Diccon lad, what of you? Will you go and find a new master or follow your old one?’

‘I follow my old master,’ said Diccon.

And Robin turned to Simon the Squire, saying: ‘Simon D’Aubernoun?’

‘Aye, Simon D’Aubernoun,’ said Sir Richard, ‘what of you? You can go to some other knight and serve him till you are of an age to win your golden spurs. Men will soon forget that you were once squire to Sir Richard-at-Lea.’

‘But *I* should not forget,’ answered Simon D’Aubernoun. ‘And I would be Sir Richard’s squire still.’ He looked very earnestly at his master, who returned his look, half smiling, but very kindly, for there was a great fondness between the knight and his squire.

Then Robin got to his feet and stood looking round at the faces of his men in the firelight. ‘Lads,’ cried he, ‘here be four new members for our band. Make them welcome to the Greenwood and this brotherhood of ours.’

Instantly the outlaws set up a cheerful shout, and scrambling to their feet, came crowding round the four new-corners, to strike hands with Sir Richard and his squire, to thump the little archer on the back, and bend the knee to the Lady Elizabeth.

When at last everybody sat down again, and the fire was stirred into a blaze and fed with fresh beech-logs against the night-time chill (for it was now very late) the four new-corners had been absorbed into the brotherhood. Sir Richard and his lady sat on either side of Robin Hood; Diccon had been swept off to the farther side of the fire, there to sit between Alan A’Dale and Will-the-Bowman; and Simon the Squire came with his slow smile to sit beside Little John and inquire about his wound.

They were a right merry party in Dunwold glade that night, and it was late indeed before at last the fire was raked out and scattered, and the last weary forest-ranger dragged himself unwillingly to his bed of fern.

How they saved Will-the-Bowman

THE YEARS WENT by and Robin Hood and his men still ruled the forests of Sherwood and Barnesdale. There were some new faces round the camp fire in the evenings now, and certain of the old familiar faces were gone, for the life of a wolfshead was at all times an uncertain thing, and in their ceaseless fight against tyranny the brotherhood sometimes suffered losses.

There was another sheriff of Nottingham—a leaner, younger man than Sheriff Murdoch had been, but every wit as much a creature of the barons; and against him and his kind Robin still waged warfare on behalf of the weak and defenceless. Many were the ventures undertaken by Robin of Barnesdale and his outlaw band; many the wrongs righted or avenged in those years; and the names of Robin Hood himself, of Little John and Scarlet and the other leaders had become household words, to be whispered at the ale-house door on summer evenings, and round the cottage hearth on winter nights when the bitter darkness seemed to press in against the warmth and shelter of the fire-shine.

So the grey winters passed, and the green summers; and there came a certain Christmas night. A bitter cold night it was, and the light covering of snow lay smooth in Dunwold glade (save where it was marked by the footprints of the outlaws and their dogs), sparkling faintly in the starlight. Hard frost had bound up the little stream with scalloped borders of ice, and in the deep blueness of the night sky the stars hung low, pulsing with frosty brilliance. On every side the forest stretched out darkly, frozen in its winter sleep, silent save when a hunting owl cried in the starry darkness. But in the main cave of Dunwold Scar, shut off from the winter night by a deerskin apron across the narrow entrance, was light and warmth and laughter—for was it not Christmas night?

On the raised stone hearth in the middle of the cave the cooking fire blazed high, giving out a fierce heat which all but roasted the assembled outlaws, as well as the great joints of venison which sizzled on spits around it. Firelight flickered redly through the cave, mingling with the glow of candles from the kissing-branch which Marian had hung from the rocky roof just within the cave.

As she sat tending sundry pies among the hot ashes, Marian sometimes glanced up at the kissing-branch, for it had cost her much time and trouble to make, on Christmas Eve, and she was proud of it. Little John had made her five hoops of green willow and bound them together into a globe, and Robin had brought her mistletoe from a certain oak tree in Clumber Forest; but she herself had bound the sprigs of rosemary closely round the willow hoops, and hung the little, red, long-biding apples in their midst and the mistletoe below, and set the candles in place among the evergreens. Now it hung there, glowing and sparkling in the light of its own crocus-flamed candles. And it was beautiful.

Many of the outlaws were gathered close around the fire, scorching themselves at the cheerful blaze and from time to time turning the sizzling joints on the spits, watched by the great ban-dogs who lay, nose on paws, among them. Others were moving hither and thither, making last-minute preparations for their Christmas feast. Fine linen had been brought from the store cave and spread upon the rough boards which served the outlaws for a table, and upon its snowy whiteness was set out a vast array of foodstuffs. The last withered apples of the year (carefully stored in bran to be eaten at Christmas time) were piled high in coarse wooden trenchers, rubbing shoulders with wheaten bread on a great dish of solid silver. Brown ale foamed in leather jacks, and there were all manner of pies and pasties in bowls and platters of cherry-wood and earthenware, pewter and horn, and gleaming silver.

The week before Christmas was always a busy one for the three womenfolk, baking and brewing for close on a hundred hungry men; but every year, when Christmas night came round, and they saw the brightness in the faces of the outlaws gathering to the feast, they knew their labours had been well worth while.

Only one of the brotherhood was not present in the great cave that night, and that was Will Stukely, Will-the-Bowman, who had gone to visit an old friend in Papplewick and was not yet back, though he had been expected for an hour or more.

Preparations for the feast went on apace, and Will Scarlet had taken the first great joint from the fire. He was shouting to Watkin to bring him a dish for it, when the deerskin apron over the cave entrance was pulled aside, and in the opening appeared the powerful figure of Will-the-Bowman, supporting a young man, hardly more than a boy, who sagged heavily against him with an arm across his shoulders.

Will Stukely came in slowly, letting the deerskins fall behind him and shutting out the bitter night; and as he and his companion came into the glow of the firelight, it could be seen that the boy was grey and shuddering with cold and exhaustion, and that his right foot was swathed in bloody rags.

Instantly, room was made for them beside the fire, and as the stranger sank down with a sigh of relief, holding out icy hands to the blaze, Robin came quickly to him, stepping over men's legs and hounds' bodies.

'What have you done to your foot, lad?' he asked.

The stranger raised a thin, gipsy-dark face to his, and replied: 'Got caught in a trap, Master.'

'Aye,' said Will. 'Some fool set a wolf-trap out in the open ride, and the boy here walked into it. Lucky I came upon him.'

Robin was already beginning very gently to unfasten the ragged neckerchief from round the wounded foot.

'It was very lucky you came upon him,' he agreed. 'The forest is no place to be out in all night in this weather—especially in a wolf-trap, which is an ill thing at any time!'

He lifted the last bloodstained fold of the bandage and laid bare an ugly, jagged wound where the iron teeth of the trap had bitten deep into the boy's ankle and instep.

A gasp came from Much-the-Miller's-Son, who had risen to look over Robin's shoulder.

Preparations for supper had quite stopped, and everybody was watching. Then Marian came through the crowd, carrying clean linen and a bowl of water, which she set down at Robin's side. 'Poor lad!' she said softly, and the young man looked up at her with a quick, grateful smile.

Robin began to bathe his guest's wounded foot, talking quietly as he did so. 'I cannot help hurting you a little, for it is an ugly wound, and wolf-traps are seldom over-clean.'

'I shall not mind a little pain, Master,' said the stranger, 'if you can only make me able to travel.'

'You'll not travel on that foot for several days,' said Robin bluntly.

'But I must! Indeed and indeed I must be in Nottingham Town by noon to-morrow!'

Robin heard the desperate note in the young man's voice, and looked up from his surgery, asking kindly: 'Why so?'

'Because of Hugh, my brother. I *must* return to him.'

Robin Hood moved a little, so as to get a better light on his task. 'What is your name?' he asked.

'Jonathan—Black Jonathan men do call me, because I be dark o' face, and also a blacksmith by trade.'

'Then, Black Jonathan, do you tell me the whole tale from the beginning, and why you must return by noon to-morrow to this brother of yours.'

The boy Jonathan winced as Robin's searching though skilful hands hurt his wounded foot; then he said: 'So be it, Master. My brother Hugh and I were left alone in the world when our father was hanged two years ago for shooting the king's deer—for our mother died long since, God rest her soul. And so each of us be all the other has, and we be dear to each other accordingly. Well, ye see, Master—I be courting a maid over to Papplewick Village, and 't isn't often as I can take a day off from my trade, save at Christmas and Easter, so I set out this morning to visit the lass. I promised Hugh as I'd be back before dark, to make merry with him, and I sent him in to Mistress Peascod over the way, to spend the day—she be always glad to have the little lad. He'll not begin to worry for me overmuch before the gates are shut for the night, and when once they *be* safe shut he'll not be able to get out until morning; but he'll worry sorely; and to-morrow, if I do not come early, he will set out in search of me—and he is but eleven years old and not learned in the ways of the forest. So ye see, Master, I must get back somehow, before harm comes to him.'

'I'll take word to the little chap to-morrow early,' Will Stukely said quickly to Robin.

'Will you? Good man!' Robin turned back to Jonathan the Blacksmith, who sat looking swiftly from one to the other. 'Listen, Jonathan,' said he, 'you'll not be able to travel on that foot for some days. Bide quiet here with us, and Will Stukely will take word from you to your brother to-morrow morning, and see that he comes to no harm.'

Jonathan hesitated, glancing from Will to Robin and back again. 'I'd be grateful,' he said. 'Hugh's over-venturesome for a youngster; but I be main sorry to put you to so much trouble.'

‘Nay, there’s no trouble,’ said Will-the-Bowman gruffly, beginning to pull gently at the ears of one of the great hounds.

Robin finished his surgery and sat back on his heels. ‘That should make your foot more comfortable,’ said he. ‘And now for our Christmas feast. Black Jonathan, you have been sent to us to be our guest, and it is good to shelter a guest on Christmas night, in memory of that night when Our Lord and His Mother found shelter in a stable, between an ox and an ass. So you shall sit in the place of honour at our feast.’

So presently, the outlaws were settled around the spread cloths, and Black Jonathan sat between Robin and Marian in the place where the high table would have been had they been gathered in the hall of a castle instead of an outlaw stronghold. The great joints of venison smoked on their chargers, and in the midst of it all, wreathed round with bays and rosemary, and set on a charger of silver-gilt that had once belonged to His Grace the Bishop of Hereford, was the boar’s head.

The outlaws feasted royally, they and their Christmas guest; and as for Black Jonathan himself, he did his best to forget his worry for the small brother at home and the throbbing pain in his foot, and played his part in the general merry-making.

Later, when the last vestiges of the feast had been hastily cleared away, all the outlaws gathered close to the fire, enjoying the warmth and light and shelter all the more by reason of the bitter cold which they knew lay beyond the deerskin apron over the doorway. Outside in the starry darkness wolves howled in the distance, and the outlaws hunched their shoulders and glanced behind them into the shadows, and drew closer in to the fire.

Alice had put fresh candles into the places of the burned-out ones on the kissing-branch; and a pile of old, lichened beech branches stood ready to keep the fire blazing.

Then Alan A’Dale struck up an old, old Christmas song; and the next moment a hundred voices joined in, ‘Blow, Northern Wind, send thou me my Sweeting.’ For a while they sang loudly and merrily, passing from one snatch of a song or carol to another. But there came a moment when they fell quiet, and Marian’s sweet, high voice soared up alone, like a lark into the sunlight. ‘The Seven Joys of Mary,’ sang Marian, and then a soft lullaby, ‘Lullay my Liking.’ And the brotherhood of outlawed men listened to her singing, many of them thinking of homes and loved ones whom they had left behind; but the sadness that came upon them with the singing of that old Christmas lullaby was a gentle sadness, and almost at once they were merry again.

Long before daylight next morning Will-the-Bowman set out for Nottingham. The snow was crisp underfoot, and not deep enough to clog his steps, and when presently the sun came up and he could see his way to travel more swiftly, he strode blithely southward through a world in which the shadows of the trees were blue as wild hyacinths across snow that sparkled in the thin winter sunlight. The criss-cross tracks of birds, and the heavier trails left by fox, wild-cat, and rabbit showed everywhere on the whiteness, and once he came upon the deeply-printed tracks of the wolf-pack that the outlaws often heard howling in the long winter nights.

He travelled swiftly, striking through the forest to join the Nottingham road, and strode along the deeply rutted way twirling his quarterstaff and whistling as he went, like any country fellow looking forward to a pleasant day in the town. The sun was not yet high when he reached the gates of Nottingham and strode through, whistling still. The lounging men-at-arms at the gate-house gave him only a casual glance as he went by, for though he was not disguised there was nothing in his russet-brown tunic and warm hood to set him apart from any other countryman who passed through the gates that day.

The snow that lay white and crisp on the road outside was churned up into a brown slush in the narrow streets, by the passing and repassing of horses and carts and men; but along every ledge, roof, and window-sill it lay as white and pure as when it had first fallen, and the grimacing gargoyles on the tower of St. Mary's Church seemed to be wearing hoods of white fur. Will-the-Bowman made his way through the town, returning the kindly greetings of the folk he met, until he came to a certain narrow street behind the corn market, to which Black Jonathan had directed him.

At the farther end of the street was a little dark-browed smithy, wedged between a tavern and a fletcher's shop. Will went down the street, pausing to glance at the quiver of fine clothyard shafts and the three slender peacock-flighted arrows which were so temptingly displayed just inside the fletcher's shop; and coming to the open door of the smithy, he looked inside. The place was empty, but seeing another door in the farther wall, which also stood open, he went across to it, and found himself looking through into a little living- and sleeping-room beyond. It was a very bare, small room, furnished only with a rough bed and table, two joint-stools, an earthenware water-jar, and a rudely carved chest, on which stood a coloured plaster figure of a saint, with a little floating wick burning in a shell full of oil before it.

A small boy was standing with his back to the door, busily belting on a long hunting-knife; and set out in readiness on the table beside him was a hunk of brown bread and cheese, and a small holly-scarlet hood. The boy was so full of his task that he never heard Will Stukely until the outlaw spoke to him.

'Are you Hugh—brother to Jonathan the Blacksmith?'

Then he whirled round, showing a dark-skinned face so like Jonathan's that Will would have known them for brothers anywhere, and demanded fiercely: 'Where is Jonathan? If you have hurt my brother Jonathan I'll—I'll *kill* you!' And he came rushing at Will, with the hunting-knife in his hand. Stukely caught him and held him off, looking down into his furious face and not heeding his struggles.

'Softly, softly, little master!' said he. 'Your brother Jonathan is safe among friends, and sent me to tell you so.'

Hugh stopped struggling, and stood quiet. 'Where is he, then? Why has he not come home?'

'Listen, Hugh,' Will Stukely said. 'Your brother caught his foot in a wolf-trap yesterday, as he was on his way home from Papplewick. I found him and sprung the trap, and took him back with me to certain good friends of mine in the forest; and there he will stay a few days, until his foot is healed.'

'Take me to him!' demanded the small boy.

Will Stukely shook his head, smiling. 'No, you must wait here. It is too long a journey for your short legs; and 'twill be only a few days before your brother Jonathan can come back to you. Now unbelt that fearsome brand from your side and we can speak together in comfort.' And when Hugh had obeyed him (though unwillingly) he went on: 'Jonathan bade me tell you to take what money you need from the place where you know it is kept. And if you are lonely, you are to go to Mistress Peascod, and ask her to let you sleep with her bairns.'

Hugh stood four-square, with his legs far apart and his hands behind him, and looked determinedly up at Will-the-Bowman. 'I be no bairn to fear the dark, and I will not sleep with bairns!' said he. 'I will stay here till my brother comes home.'

'That is for you to decide for yourself,' said Will. 'And now, little master, I must be on my way. Is there anything else, before I go?'

'No—except—you're sure my brother Jonathan's foot will heal?' Hugh came a pace nearer, and said beseechingly: 'He will not *die*, will he? Tall man, you'll not let him die?'

Will Stukely looked down very kindly at the small boy. 'He'll not die,' said he. 'Have no fear of that.'

When the wood-ranger found himself out in the street again, he glanced up at the sun, where it shone above the steep gables at the corn market end; and judged that it was nearly noon. He had broken his fast early that morning, and tramped a long way since, and now he was hungry. So he bent his steps in the direction of a certain inn named 'Salutation', which was well known to the outlaws, for the innkeeper was a good friend of theirs and had given them news of travellers, and aided them from time to time.

The 'Salutation' was in Chandler's Street. A great bush of fir branches jutting out half-way across the street marked it for an inn; but an even better inn-sign was the savoury smell which floated forth from the open doorway and scented the whole street. Will Stukely sniffed the rich smell with pleasure as he stepped over the threshold and came face to face with the little fat innkeeper.

A huge fire blazed at one end of the single long room, and several people were gathered as close to it as they could get. Two or three dogs lay nose-on-paws among the thickly strewn rushes, and George the Potman sat cross-legged in one corner polishing a row of pewter pots. The smell of savoury mutton pies was warm and rich upon the air, and already the trestle table had been set up at the end of the room farthest from the fire, in readiness for the meal.

Will Stukely found himself a stool and sat down with his back against the wall and his quarterstaff propped beside him. In a little while he was joined by the innkeeper, who pulled up another stool beside him.

'You'd best not be long about your dinner, friend,' said the innkeeper under his breath.

'Why? You are not usually so churlish!' replied Will, laughingly.

'Churlish I am *not*, and well you know it. But Nottingham be no safe place for such as you, in these days. The sheriff has some new bee in his bonnet: that the—Gentry of the Greenwood—have friends within the gates. Three times already this week have I had the 'Salutation' turned inside out by men-at-arms in the hope that I had an outlaw hidden up the chimney; and there's not an innkeeper in Nottingham Town that isn't driven half crazy by the same poking and prying!

The sheriff's men came yesterday, so they'll not likely come again to-day; but 'tis best to be on the safe side, and the sooner you're away out of here, the better it will be!

'I'll be away as soon as my dinner be inside me,' Will assured him, easily, eyeing the long trestle table, where the innkeeper's daughter was setting out great dishes of hot mutton pies on the white, scrubbed boards.

But Will-the-Bowman was never to finish that dinner; for as he sat with his meal half-eaten before him, deep in friendly talk with a grey-haired old farmer who sat next to him at the table, the doorway was suddenly darkened, as three men-at-arms came thrusting in from the street.

Will Stukely, with his mouth full of mutton, looked up at their entrance, and then sat quite still, with an expression of mild inquiry on his face. He was in deadly danger, and he knew it, and cursed himself for his foolhardiness in coming to the inn; but as he *had* come, his best chance was to behave exactly as his fellow guests were behaving.

The innkeeper got up from the table, after casting one agonized glance of warning at Will Stukely, and turned to the men-at-arms, saying grumpily: 'Oh, it's *you* again, is it?'

'Aye!' agreed the foremost of the men-at-arms—a surly, red-eyed fellow. 'It's *us* again, come to search the house for wolfsheads, according to the sheriff's orders.'

'Well, don't you go a-pulling my house out-of-doors this time, as you did last—thrusting your ugly noses into honest folks' houses, pulling the soot down their chimneys and frightening their womenfolk and keeping custom away!'

The red-eyed man growled something in reply and turned his back on the innkeeper, to order the guests to remain where they were.

The search began. While the leader of the men-at-arms stood insolently before the door, devouring a mutton pie which he had taken from the table, and keeping a wary eye on the guests, the other two were searching the room in a rather haphazard fashion. As for the guests, they had given up all attempts at eating, and sat anxiously watching the men-at-arms. All of them, save one, knew that they were not outlaws; but at that time, to be innocent of a thing was no safeguard against being hanged for it, and every man there was feeling his neck uncomfortably tight, as though the hangman's rope was already about it.

Will Stukely sat quietly in his place, though he longed to leap up and hurl himself upon the man who stood in the open doorway. Presently the sheriff's men had finished searching the inn parlour and the rooms beyond. They had raked up the rushes and pulled the linen out of the mistress's dower chest, kicked the dogs, smashed several pieces of treasured crockery, browbeaten the womenfolk of the house, and generally behaved as small scoundrels in the pay of a greater scoundrel are wont to do.

Then they turned their attention to the guests; and the keen eye of one of them chanced to fall on Will Stukely's left hand as it lay on the table before him. The fellow glanced meaningly at his comrades, and then, turning to a man at the lower end of the table, he demanded rudely: 'You—old Greybeard—your name and trade?'

'Simon Scorby,' replied the man, 'and I be a farmer.'

The man-at-arms turned to the next man: 'And yours?'

‘Jon of Kirkby, master fletcher.’

‘And yours?’ The man asked the same question all round the table until he came to Will Stukely.

‘Piers Cobbold, master thatcher,’ said Will, easily; and the next instant the hand of the sheriff’s man came down on his shoulder.

‘Liar!’ said the sheriff’s man. ‘You’re one of those accursed wolfsheads that follow Robin of Barnesdale!’

Up sprang Will to his feet. ‘’Tis *you* that are the liar!’ cried he. ‘An honest thatcher am I, of Birkhampstead Village!’ But he knew that he had made a fatal mistake. What a fool he had been to claim thatching for his trade, he thought, as the three men-at-arms flung themselves upon him.

Two of them contrived to hold him, despite his frantic struggles, while the third dragged out his left arm and looked at his hand.

Now the harsh reed which thatchers use in their trade leaves many small scars on the palms of their hands. On Will Stukely’s palms there were no such scars; but on the side of his forefinger was a patch of hardened skin, almost a corn, and this was the unfailing sign of a bowman, for it was caused by the chafe of the arrow as it flew from the bow—not occasionally, on Sundays at the practice butts, but many times a day, every day, year after year.

‘So, Master Thatcher!’ cried one of his captors. ‘That corn did not grow in a day!’

‘Aye!’ cried another, dragging the hood back from Will’s face. ‘And I know this rogue! Three years ago we met at the shooting for the Silver Arrow. Well do I remember him, for he almost split my head in two!’

Will Stukely ceased to struggle; then, as the grasp of his tormentors slackened a little, he twisted round, like an eel, diving under an unwary arm, and snatched up his quarterstaff. ‘Aye!’ he cried, whirling it before him. ‘Wolfshead I be! And I follow Robin of Barnesdale! Now take me if you can!’

Kicked-up rushes filled the air; benches and stools went over. The guests hastily got themselves out of harm’s way as the trestle table went down with a crash, and a terrified dog ran howling into the street.

Will Stukely put up a desperate fight for life and freedom, and none of his three attackers was swift or bold enough to break through the whirling defence of his quarterstaff. Slowly and steadily he moved back towards the open door; and escape seemed very near, when he caught his heel against an overturned bench-end. He staggered, and half fell; his quarterstaff flew wide, and in that unguarded instant one of the sheriff’s men brought his own staff down in a glancing blow on the side of the outlaw’s head. The next moment the fight flowed over him.

Struggle as he would, he was but one man against three. They jerked him to his feet and twisted his arms behind him; and there he stood, drawing his breath in great gasps, while the blood from his broken head trickled down his temple and cheek.

He had left his mark on the sheriff’s men: one of them nursed a broken elbow; one was still dizzy from a blow on the head, and the tally of bruised ribs and shoulders was hidden beneath their buff jerkins. But now they had him at their mercy.

‘Ho! Landlord!’ cried one. ‘Bring stout cords here to bind this fellow’s wrists!’

The innkeeper, who all this time had stood watching miserably, began to rummage about in a helpless sort of way, looking in every place where he knew there was no cord, in the vain hope that if only he could delay matters long enough, something unexpected would happen to save Will Stukely. At last the sheriff’s man lost all patience and swore that if cord was not found at once they would begin to wonder whether the landlord were not a secret friend of the outlaws.

At this, Will Stukely raised his bleeding head slowly, saying: ‘He is no friend to we of the Greenwood; nor did he know me for what I am—or he’d have given me no place at his table, I’ll warrant!’

The innkeeper, who had his head inside a wall-press at that moment, while he dragged a length of hempen cord from within it, puckered up his face woefully when he heard this; and as he handed the cord to the man-at-arms he tried to catch Will’s eye and send him some signal that he was not to lose hope. But the outlaw’s head was turned away, his eyes on the free sunshine beyond the doorway, and he did not see the innkeeper’s signal.

So they lashed his hands cruelly tight behind him, and thrust him out into the street and away towards the sheriff’s house.

In the parlour of the Salutation Inn the landlord and his guests looked at each other among the overturned benches and scattered remnants of the mutton pies. There was not one soul there but was in sympathy with the outlaw, yet none of them had dared to lift a finger on his behalf for fear of the sheriff and the power of the barons; and now they were ashamed.

The master fletcher shook his head. ‘Fine-looking chap, too,’ said he, dismally.

‘Aye,’ rejoined he of Kirkby, ‘and by this time to-morrow he will be carrion outside the Bridlesmith Gate!’

Gloomy silence descended on the whole company. Everybody knew that it was only too true. Free men, and even serfs, could not be condemned without trial by jury; but an outlaw had no rights. He was wolfsheaded—every man’s hand against him. He did not have to be tried. If he was caught he was hanged—there was no more to be said about it.

George the Potman had set solidly to work, righting the overturned benches and trestles, and presently the guests sat down again to finish their interrupted meal—though indeed they had little taste left for the food.

A little later, while carving a cold chine of bacon on the side-chest, the landlord managed to get his head close to George’s and whisper: ‘Geordie lad, go up to the sheriff’s house and wait about with your ears open until you hear when Will Stukely is to hang, and where; then take word of it to Robin Hood. You know the road.’

‘Aye,’ whispered back George, hacking slices from a great loaf. ‘I’ve travelled it often enough before now, Master.’

So about an hour before sunset, George the Potman strode out through the northern gate and took the Worksop road to carry news to the outlaw band that Will Stukely had been taken prisoner by the sheriff’s men and was to hang at

dawn to-morrow outside the Bridlesmith Gate (even as Jon of Kirkby had foretold).

Several times before he had made the journey between Nottingham and Dunwold Scar, carrying news or a warning, and he knew the way well; yet the forest looked strange in its wintry covering of snow, and stranger still when the sun had gone and the moon came creeping up into the eerie darkness. He lost his way two or three times and had to retrace his steps. Once he blundered into a straying forest pony, and, as the creature sprang away, thought for one terrible moment that the Phantom Horse of Barnesdale had strayed south. But he pressed on, and at last, towards midnight, he came out into Dunwold Glade and caught the faint flicker of firelight shining through a chink in the deerskin apron over the main cave doorway.

Standing on the edge of the glade, he lifted up his voice in a strange, long-drawn cry, the seeking-cry of the outlaws, which they used when searching for each other, because of the long distance it would carry. The next moment arose a wild uproar of baying, the deerskin was thrust aside and a score of great hounds came pouring down from the cave and streaked across the snow towards him.

George called them by name: 'Gelert!—Beaufort!—Keri!—Breon! Good lads!' And as they came rushing up he thrust out his clenched fists for them to smell at. They crowded round him, their baying dying out into friendly whining as they sniffed his fists and then his boots; and the next instant Robin himself leaped down from the cave doorway, and was striding across the snow, with Little John and Will Scarlet behind him.

'Who comes here?' he demanded.

'It is I, George the Potman from the "Salutation",' called back George.

'George! Do you bring a message? Come in, lad, for it's cold out here.'

George followed the three outlaws, with the dogs flowing all about him, scrambled up the steep bank, dived under the deerskin apron, and stood blinking in the warmth and firelight of the great cave.

The outlaws were later than usual that night, in honour of its being Christmas time, but they had been on the point of seeking their beds of dried fern when they had heard the seeking-cry, and the hounds had rushed baying into the night. They stood round the fire, ready for action, every man facing the cave doorway; but when George the Potman appeared they sat down again.

'You bring me a message from Will Stukely?' Robin asked quickly, for he had expected Will back before dark and had been growing steadily more anxious about him for some hours past.

'Not *from* him, Master, but *of* him,' replied George, standing solidly in front of the outlaw captain. 'He do be taken prisoner by the sheriff's cut-throats, and will hang at dawn to-morrow outside the Bridlesmith Gate.'

A gasp, a groan, rose from the outlaws. Robin caught George the Potman by the shoulders and turned him fully to the light. 'Is this true?' he demanded, in a harsh voice. 'Are you sure?'

'Sure as fate, Master! I saw him taken, and I stood among the folks before the sheriff's house and heard the sheriff himself give the order.'

Robin dropped his hands and swung round on his men. 'Roger, Diggery, Jon, Hugh, Lightfoot, David, Hob, Ket—you will remain here to garrison the Scar. The rest of you make ready to start for Nottingham at once. Much, see to the

issue of clothyard shafts—eight shafts to each man.’

In grim silence the outlaws set about preparing for the venture. Little John, his bow already in his hands, looked down on them from his greater height, with the blue light of battle beginning to flicker in his eyes.

‘We’ll save old Will if we have to pull down the walls of Nottingham, stone by stone, to get him,’ he said to Robin; ‘but it’ll be a stiffish job!’

‘No, John, I have a better plan than that,’ replied Robin, and his eyes crinkled a little in a half smile, though his mouth was very grim. ‘Come with me now,’ and followed by his tall lieutenant, he turned and strode across to the dark mouth of the store-cave.

When they came back Little John carried a bundle under his arm. They found the outlaw band standing ready: the eight who were being left behind were still sitting round the fire, and a little apart from them sat Jonathan the Blacksmith, with hunched shoulders and drooping head. He looked up as Robin entered, saying miserably: ‘Oh, Master, it be all *my* fault!’

Robin put his hand for an instant on his shoulder. ‘Never say that. Besides, we shall save him, and no harm done.’

So the brotherhood set out on the long march that was to end at the gates of Nottingham.

Now on the side of Nottingham on which the wall was pierced by the Bridlesmith Gate, a spinney of birch and witchen trees and ancient oaks grew not much more than a bowshot from the town. It had been left there when the forest was cleared back for pastureland, because it belonged to the Good People, the Wee Folk, who would be sure to bring ill luck upon anyone who interfered with it. And there, in the dark hour before the dawn, close on a hundred silent-moving men of the forest took cover among the dense tangle of hazel, brambles and old-man’s-beard which formed the undergrowth.

Robin squatted down with his ready-strung bow across his knees, one hand twisted in the collar of Breon, the old pack-leader of the outlaws’ dogs, who crouched beside him. On his left was Will Scarlet; and on his right Much-the-Miller’s-Son crouched with his bow beside him and one arm round the neck of Keri—Breon’s son. Beyond them on either side, and behind, in the deeps of the spinney, Robin knew that the rest of his band crouched unseen, each with his bow beside him, and many of them with a hand on the collar of a great dog—for many puppies had been born in the forest, and the few ban-dogs which had come with Friar Tuck on that autumn evening more than seven years ago had become a pack of fully a score.

So they waited, men and dogs together, gazing out from their cover across the snow-blanketed open ground towards the walls of Nottingham, while slowly the darkness thinned, and a growing radiance began to spread across the eastern sky.

Meanwhile, a ragged palmer came trudging down the road from Worksop, and after pausing to glance up at the stark outline of the gibbet which had been set up near the gates on the evening before, shook his head, and went to sit on the patch of bare ground where the snow had drifted back from the wall. Very patiently he sat there, with his back propped against the great stones of the town wall, drawing his patched and tattered cloak close about him to keep out the bitter cold of winter dawn. As the light grew, it might be seen that he was a very giant of a

man, head and shoulders taller than most other men, and huge-boned in proportion. He seemed to be waiting for the gates to open so that he might enter the town; and as he sat there he turned often to look up at the stark, ugly shape of the gallows, which was beginning to stand out clearly against the growing lightness in the sky.

Dawn came at last—a low dawn showing but a bar of gold far down in the east between the dark rampart of the forest and the grey cloud-roof overhead.

With the dawn there began the sounds of life from within the walls of Nottingham, and in a short while the gates were swung open and a company of men-at-arms came out. One of them went straight to the gallows to make sure that the rope was truly fixed and had not been tampered with; and to him the palmer addressed himself: ‘Tell me, young man, what poor soul is to be hanged here this day?’

‘A notorious outlaw—one that followed Robin Hood himself,’ the man replied. ‘A very desperate fellow, who fought like a cornered wolf before he was taken, so I’ve heard say. But he’ll be quiet enough when we have done with him!’

‘And his name?’ asked the palmer.

‘Will-the-Bowman, they do call him.’

The palmer gave a great cry, and exclaimed: ‘It was so they nicknamed Will Stukely. Ah, good sir, is it Will Stukely that you hang this day?’

‘That is he!’ cut in another man, with a brutal laugh. ‘If he be a friend of yours you’d better not own it, lest we hang you too!’

‘Alas! and alas!’ murmured the palmer, sadly, not seeming to heed him. ‘His mother and mine were sisters, and we often played together when we were little; and now he has come to this, poor lad! Indeed this be a sad home-coming for me, after so many years in the Holy Land!’

But the men-at-arms had turned their backs upon him, and were busied about the gibbet; and the palmer, finding that they were no longer watching him, stopped shaking his head and sighing, and sat—watching them.

Soon came the sheriff—a lean, black-browed man with a savage face, shivering in his thick-furred gown; and with him walked a short, burly knight in chain-mail, with a golden griffon on the breast of his blue surcoat. And this was Sir Hugo de Razeby, Lord of Nottingham Castle.

A few moments later, out from the shadows of the gatehouse came some three-score men-at-arms—sheriff’s men and castle men, marching in two separate companies. In their midst strode Will Stukely, with his hands bound behind him and his head held very high; and by his side shambled an aged priest, mouthing prayers and determined to save his soul whether he would or no.

Will Stukely paid no heed to the priest, but when he was halted beneath the gallows, turned to face the sheriff, saying earnestly: ‘Master Sheriff, my Captain never yet had a man of his hanged on a gallows tree. Do not make me the first of our brotherhood to die a felon’s death.’

‘Listen to him!’ cried the sheriff, with a jeering laugh. ‘Listen to the scoundrel praying for his life!’

An angry flush rose to Will’s cheek, and he raised his head higher yet. ‘I do not pray for my life, for I would not take it as a gift from such as you! I ask only that my hands may be unbound and a good keen blade put into them; then let all

your men-at-arms come upon me at once, and I will go down fighting.'

Sir Hugo looked as though, if it were for him to decide, he would grant the outlaw's request (for he was a kindly man and disliked the whole ugly business). But it was for the sheriff to decide, and the sheriff was enjoying the humiliation of his enemy to the depths of his small black soul. He laughed gloatingly. 'No, no, my fine-stomached gentleman! Hang you shall—and so should your hedge-creeping master if he were here! I'll not waste my good men-at-arms upon such carrion as you!'

'If you are afraid that I should spoil so many of them,' said Will-the-Bowman, 'unbind my hands and give me no weapon. Let me face your men with my hands empty but free—and if I be hanged this day, Hell may have my soul!'

'Save your breath,' replied the sheriff. 'It will serve you better for your prayers!'

Then Will Stukely shut his mouth and scorned to plead any more. The old priest was hovering round him, gabbling prayers; but Will heeded him no more than if he had been a buzzing fly. He was looking his last on the world that he loved.

The light was strong now, and the low sunshine slanting under the cloud-roof lay level over the snowy countryside; and Will Stukely gazed wide-eyed out across the whitened meadowland towards the dark rim of the forest that would never shelter him again. He had forgotten bitter nights and weary marches, hunger and the smart of old wounds; and he was remembering mornings when spring ran like green flame through the forest; warm, dark summer nights, and misty autumn days on the hunting-trail; and the laughter and companionship round the camp fires when the day's work was over... .

A very few moments more, and the noose would have been about his neck; then the palmer, who had been quite unnoticed by the gate all this while, got up and made his way towards the sheriff.

'Good Master Sheriff,' cried he in a trembling voice, 'this is my mother's sister's son that you are about to hang. Often we played together as little lads, and now I return from the Holy Land to find him in this sorry plight. Let me bid him good-bye, I beg you, for old time's sake.'

'If it pleases you to speak with such as he, you may do so,' said the sheriff, with an evil smile. 'But be quick about it, and afterwards—we will inquire into this fondness of yours for a condemned wolfshead.'

The tall palmer bent his head submissively, and, turning, went to where Will Stukely stood ready beneath the gallows. 'Ah, my cousin, this is a terrible thing!' said the palmer, edging in between the captive and the still jabbering priest.

Will-the-Bowman started at the sound of the other's voice, and wrenched himself round to stare into his eyes; but already the tall palmer had leaped behind him.

'Your hands, lad! Hold steady!'

Will felt a sharp pain as the blade which severed his bonds also gashed his wrist; then he was free! It was all so swift that the startled men-at-arms had no time to realize what was happening. Something bright flashed out from under the palmer's ragged cloak, and the next moment the two men had whirled round, and stood back to back, each with a naked broadsword in his hand.

Like a pack of hounds pulling down a deer, the sheriff's men hurled themselves upon the two, who met them with flickering, deadly sword-points.

'Keep up your heart, Will!' cried Little-John-the-Palmer. 'Here comes the brotherhood to our aid!'

Crouching watchful in the spinney, the outlaws had seen all that befell; and at the moment that Little John turned from the sheriff towards the bound figure of Will Stukely, they had slipped the straining hounds from the leash. As the great brutes sprang forward every man rose to his feet, nocking an arrow to his string.

The sheriff was hovering on the outskirts of the fray, and urging on the men-at-arms to make an end of the outlaws. He heard a warning shout from Sir Hugo, and looking round, beheld a great pack of ban-dogs streaking towards him from the nearby spinney—great, grey brutes more like wolves than dogs, who gave tongue as they ran; and behind them a horde of brown-clad figures had risen from the undergrowth, and were loping across the meadow-land, each man with an arrow nocked to his bowstring.

The sheriff's face grew livid at the sight, and he wavered backward towards the gates. Some of the men-at-arms had seen them now. Shouts and cries of warning filled the air, and the press around the two outlaws began to slacken as man after man turned to face the new menace, more afraid of the slavering, baying hounds than they were of the bowmen who followed.

Then the oncoming outlaws checked for an instant, and loosed. Their clothyard shafts hummed like a flight of angry hornets into the midst of the men-at-arms. Many of them fell under that first flight, and next moment the dogs were upon them, red-eyed and milky-toothed.

Before the attack of these savage enemies, the first ranks wavered and began to fall back on those behind, heedless of the shouts and oaths of their captains.

The sheriff had already disappeared through the town gates, having none of the courage of old Sheriff Murdoch. Sir Hugo strove desperately to rally his own men; but the task was hopeless, and he could only fall back with them, or wait to be torn to pieces by the huge dogs. And as the outlaws, coming on apace, halted to send another flight of arrows into their midst, the men-at-arms broke and ran.

Robin and his men swept after them, driving them like a flock of sheep. The flight became a rout, which ended only at the gates of the town, and in the forefront of the victorious outlaw charge ran Little John and Will Stukely.

At the gates they fell back, whistling off the dogs, and turned about towards the forest. They had done what they came to do, and had no wish to charge into a trap; and at any moment the men-at-arms might rally and come out upon them with the townsfolk added to their numbers. So, swiftly, and keeping a sharp look-out behind them against surprise, with the hounds padding in and out among them and Will Stukely in their midst, the outlaws returned to the spinney.

They did not go through it, but skirted its northern side, and then struck away for the forest, following the trampled maze of tracks that they had left on the outward journey.

Not until they were well in among the trees did they halt.

'That was a close thing!' said Robin. 'You played your part finely, Little John; but my heart sickened when I saw you so hard pressed. Yet we could not have come to your aid sooner, lest we spoiled our own surprise and Will be hustled back within the gates before we could come up with him.'

Little John laughed and slipped off the clogging folds of the palmer's cloak. 'Aye, it was hottish while it lasted; but myself and Will-the-Bowman, back to back, would be a match for greater odds than those!'

Will Stukely looked round quickly, as though to speak; then one of the dogs came thrusting its head between his knees, and he bent down to fondle it. They were old friends, he and Robin and Little John, and there was no need of spoken gratitude between them.

In a short while they started out again. George the Potman parted from them and went his separate way, back towards the northern gate of Nottingham, which would by this time be open for all to pass freely in and out. But the outlaws held on northward, until they arrived at last, a little after noon, leg-weary but triumphant, in the broad glade below Dunwold Scar.

How the King supped in Barnesdale Forest

THE FOLLOWING SPRING news came to England that Richard Cœur-de-Lion was a prisoner in the hands of the Duke of Austria. Everyone knows the story of how his prison was discovered by Blondel, his favourite minstrel, and how England paid the ransom demanded for her king.

Robin Hood and his men of the Greenwood paid their share and more than their share of that ransom. They paid it in fine pack-horses and bales of velvet and silver tissue, in bags of gold pieces, in weapons fit for a king, jewels that would have graced a queen, and silver chargers from an archbishop's table. Half the contents of their treasure store they sent to London Town, and the officers of the treasury, when they came to open the horse-packs, wondered very much who could have sent such a gift. But the drivers of the pack-train had disappeared the moment the horses had been handed over, and so the matter remained a mystery.

At last the ransom was paid, and the king came home. And many indeed were the tasks that he found awaiting him. In his absence his brother John had been hard at work, tightening his hold on the land by every means in his power, with the intention of wresting the Crown from the true king.

Hubert Walter, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had done his best to keep England safe for her king, but it was little enough he could do against the wild young man who was the king's brother. In their greedy questing after power, John and his many followers had crushed and trampled the people beneath ruthless feet, and Richard Cœur-de-Lion found that he had come home to an England in which many of the barons and almost all the churchmen were in revolt against him and eager to set his brother on the throne, while honest folk had grown sullen and bitter with long oppression. It was a land in which men had given up hope, and women were always afraid.

King Richard set grimly to work to right matters. With a merciless hand he rooted out the nests of robber barons: slowly, surely, he won back for England the freedom that had been reaved from her.

Summer came, and the king paused from his labours, knowing that he had done well. Much was still wrong with England, yet much had been set right, and for a little while he could rest. So, being in the north at the time, he took up his abode for a while in Nottingham Castle, where Sir Hugo de Razeby made him very welcome, both because he was the king, and for the sake of an old friendship between them.

With the king in the castle, and his Court spilling over into all the best inns in the town, Nottingham was very gay that summer. Knights' Ladies and Merchants' Ladies sent to London for silks and samites and cloths of gold and silver, wherewith to make them new gowns, while their husbands flaunted

themselves abroad in furred velvet and the latest long-toed shoes; and even the little Italian greyhounds were tricked out with silver bells on their collars.

During the daytime the narrow streets were as gay as the alleyways of a fairground, for even the poorest people seemed to be in holiday mood; and when darkness fell, every window in the great keep of the castle shone yellow as wild wall-flowers above the huddled roofs of the town. Then the strains of viol and lute would float down into the narrow streets close beneath the castle walls; and the humble folk, catching the faint thread of music, would raise their heads to listen, and say to each other that the king was making merry.

On one such evening the king sat in his usual place at the high table in the castle hall, with Sir Hugo beside him, among the Lords of his own Court and the Great Folk of Nottingham. It was a still, hot night, with no breath of wandering air to stir the flames of the wax candles or set the torches flaring in their wall-sconces. Supper was over, and the cloths would soon be drawn from the long tables; and gentle-folk, burgesses and men-at-arms, having eaten and drunk their fill, sat peacefully in their places, listening to the plaintive notes of the lute, as a tall, hungry-looking minstrel sang the woeful tale of Elain, the Lily-maid of Astelot.

The king sat with one elbow on the table and his chin cupped in his palm, gazing idly before him down the length of the hall, past the knights and their ladies to where the men-at-arms and castle archers crowded the lowest table.

His thick brown hair was encircled by a jewelled fillet; a huge emerald burned like a green flame on his forefinger, and the Leopards of England shone golden across his scarlet surcoat. A very gallant figure he made, sitting there, with his strong face lit by the glow of the candles on the table before him, with his dark eyes and wilful mouth, and straight black brows frowning a little. He seemed to be listening to the sad tale of the Lily Maid, but in reality he did not even hear the voice of the minstrel, and before the tale was ended he turned to Sir Hugo, saying in his quick voice: 'I watched your archers at the practice butts this morning, my friend.'

'Well, Sire?'

'No, ill!' retorted the king, his mouth twitching into a half smile that robbed his words of some of their harshness.

Sir Hugo's plump face looked like that of a hound puppy that has been slapped when it expected to be petted. He shrugged helplessly. 'Nay, Sire, you're too hard upon them.'

'Am I? Perhaps so. They are as good as others of their kind; but I have heard that Sherwood breeds the best archers in all broad England, and I expected better marksmanship than any I saw this morning.'

A lean, hawk-nosed old knight, sitting farther down the table, broke in with a laugh: 'Tell the king that Robin Hood has the pick of the bowmen in these parts, and leaves only the dregs for service with the Crown!'

Sir Hugo flushed angrily, and made no reply; but the king turned to the latest speaker, demanding quickly: 'Is that true, Sir Ranulf?'

'This is true, at least, Sire.' It was yet another man that answered—a quiet-voiced man with the livid scar of an old wound on his cheek. 'That the finest bowmen in all the forest country follow Robin Hood; but that is because he trains his men as a wise falconer trains a gyre-falcon, and not because they were

skilled above the usual run of archers when they came to him.'

'This Robin Hood,' said the king. 'I have heard whispers of his name before to-night.'

'What did the whispers tell you, Sire?'

'Aye, Sire.' It was Sir Ranulf again. 'You'll have heard a pretty tale, I'll be bound!'

The king looked from the hawk nose to the scarred cheek, and he thought that the scarred knight had much the truer face.

'I have heard that with his hundred men he holds sway over the whole of Sherwood and Barnesdale, even as far west as the Peak,' he said. 'I have heard strange tales of the king's authority being set at naught, and of men snatched from the very gallows' foot, and of daring robberies and fat manors raided; and of wrongs righted and kindnesses done to the poor. Tell me, Sir Ranulf, and you too, Sir Hugh de Staunton, are these tales true?'

'True enough!' growled Sir Ranulf. 'The rogue has more effrontery than any other wolfshead that ever I heard of. Nothing is safe from him, and nothing sacred to him; and he has made his name a terror through the whole north country.'

'But only to such as deserve it,' said Sir Hugh, very softly—so softly that the king feigned not to have heard him.

'It would seem that this is no ordinary outlaw,' said Richard. 'Tell me, Sir Ranulf: is it true that he robbed you of three hundred pounds last year?'

'Yes, curse him!' replied the hawk-nosed knight. 'And if I ever catch the rogue!——'

'But you never will,' said Sir Hugh. 'And I, for one, would be sorry if he were taken.'

The king turned to him. 'Perhaps you have never suffered at his hands?'

'I have never suffered at his hands, Sire, because I am not over-rich, and because my serfs are well fed and happy.'

'The other tales were true, then, Sir Hugh?' demanded the king. 'The tales of wrongs righted and kindness to the poor folk?'

'They were true. Robin Hood is a good friend to the poor, and no honest man ever had cause to fear him.'

'You would seem to be a staunch friend to this outlaw!'

Old Sir Ranulf cut in with an ugly sneer: 'Why, it would ill befit Sir Hugh to speak ill of his own kinsman!'

The king raised his brows. 'What does that mean, Sir Hugh?'

'Robin Hood is kin to me by marriage. His wife Marian is my cousin,' replied Sir Hugh de Staunton, levelly.

Sir Ranulf laughed harshly. 'Yes—he stole her from her rightful bridegroom on her wedding-eve—this honest outlaw!'

'He did not. She fled to him of her own free will!' The younger knight never raised his voice, but the scar on his cheek changed suddenly from white to painful, fiery red. The king saw that in a moment there would be a violent quarrel between the two, and there had been enough quarrelling lately in England; so he turned the conversation in a safer direction.

'It is in my mind that I should much like to meet this Robin Hood,' said he. 'Tell me, where shall I find him, Sir Hugh?'

‘Not in Sherwood at this time of year, unless he were to come south on a raid.’

‘Where, then?’ the king demanded quickly.

‘If you would meet with Robin Hood, Sire, you must go north to Doncaster. Take one or two of your lords with you, lodge there for the night, and next morning take the road that runs north through Barnesdale Forest. Go clad as monks, for it is against churchmen that Robin’s hand is heaviest; and if you do this you will surely meet with Robin Hood.’

The next day three black Dominican Monks—seemingly an abbot and two lesser brethren—rode out from Nottingham by the northern gate and headed for Doncaster. They lodged in the best tavern in Doncaster that night, and next morning set forth once more, by the York road.

The two brethren were inclined to grumble, for they regretted leaving the ease and comfort of Nottingham Castle, and thought the king was on a fool’s errand; but Richard-the-Abbot, riding a little ahead of them, was in a holiday mood, and his eyes danced in the shadow of his sable cowl as he watched the sunlit road ahead.

The road was deep-rutted, and the dust kicked up by horse’s hooves settled thickly on the unfortunate brethren in the rear, who were soon powdered from head to foot so that their black habits seemed almost white, while their eyes smarted and their throats were sore. Little cared Abbot Richard for that; the rolling dust-cloud was behind him, and ahead lay the promise of adventure. The air was honey-sweet with the fragrance of elder trees in bloom along the wayside, and already the golden horns of the honeysuckle were blowing in the light summer breeze which whispered among the tree-tops and through the wayside grass. Cuckoos shouted from thickets far and near; and all the world seemed gay and warm, and the white road beckoned on—and on.

They had ridden ten miles or more, and were drawing close to the branch road from Selby to Pomfret, when the adventure that the king had been seeking came upon him.

Out from a thicket of goat-willow some forty paces ahead stepped a man in garments of Lincoln green, who moved into the middle of the road and stood to await their coming. He was a tall man, lean and powerful as a wolf-hound, and the hood of his capuchin, lying back on his shoulders, revealed a thin face burned deeply brown by the sun that had bleached the ends of his crisp dark hair almost to silver. He carried no bow, and his sword rested peaceably in its sheath; but suddenly, as Richard reined in his horse to an amble, the woodshore was alive with men, each with bow ready-drawn and arrow menacing one or other of the monkish party.

So Richard-the-Abbot, guessing who the tall man was, smiled to himself in the shadow of his cowl as he ambled nearer.

Robin awaited the coming of the three monks, standing quite still on the crown of the road. He had little hopes of a rich haul from their saddlebags, for no churchmen, most assuredly, would travel the forest highways without a strong escort, if they had gold or valuables about them. None-the-less, these three black monks had the well-to-do look of a rich abbey about them, and their horses were splendid animals; and anyway, it went against the grain with Robin to allow churchmen to pass through his forest realm unmolested; so he waited.

The tall man riding a little in advance of the other two, with his cowl pulled far over his face, had an air of pride and power which marked him out as one in authority; and to him Robin addressed himself, catching his bridle-rein as he drew level.

‘Good day to you, My Lord Abbot!’ said he. ‘If you have any gold in those saddlebags of yours, you shall pay it to me and my men as toll-fare for your safe passage through this forest of ours.’

While he was yet speaking, two of the wood-rangers stepped out to the heads of the monks’ horses. The disguised lords yielded up their bridles to them, fuming inwardly, but not daring to resist because of the bowmen among the trees; and Abbot Richard enjoyed their discomfiture as he replied courteously: ‘We have no gold; but if you are Robin of Barnesdale, as I think you are, we bring you a message from the king, who has heard much of you and your men.’

Without releasing the horse’s bridle, Robin bent his head, saying reverently: ‘God Save the King.’

‘Strange words from a traitor!’ retorted the other swiftly.

For a moment Robin made no reply, only he grew white under his tan, as he stared up into the abbot’s face. Then said he, speaking in a voice that was very quiet, yet ugly to hear: ‘If you were not the king’s messenger, you should bitterly regret that word! I am as true a man to the king as ever lived, and so is every one of my band. We never yet injured honest man, and our enemies are those who, in the king’s name or the name of his brother, have made this England of ours a hell for all who are weaker than themselves!’

‘Then surely the clergy should be safe from your way-layings?’

‘It is with the clergy that we have most quarrel of all, for they are worse than the barons—as *you* should know, Master Abbot,’ replied Robin. Then he added, less bitterly: ‘Yet, since you are the king’s messenger, welcome to you and your brethren, for the king’s sake; and you shall taste of our Greenwood cheer before you deliver your message.’ And so saying, he turned the horse’s head and began to lead it in among the trees. The other outlaws followed, leading the seeming monks among them, and in a few moments the roadway was deserted.

They travelled in silence, the disguised king and his two lords marvelling at the sureness with which the wood-rangers knew their way where all ways looked alike. By mazy deer-paths they went, through darkling hollows that gave place to long open glades, traversing broad rides that ended in tangled thickets where the riders must bend low to avoid the whipping branches, out into the sunshine of open commons where the gorse flamed to the summer sky, past forest pools where the midges danced above the shadowed water.

Not until they were nearing the end of their journey did Robin speak again; and then he looked up over his shoulder, saying: ‘You have no cause to fear, My Lord Abbot; if your saddlebags were crammed with gold they would be safe, and you and your lesser brethren also, for King Richard’s sake.’

The Stane Ley was all but deserted when they reached it, for the day had scarcely turned towards evening, and only the cooks for the day bent over the turf ovens at the farther end of the glade, busied with the first preparations for supper, while a few hounds lay asleep in the sunshine or snapping idly at the summer flies that buzzed about them.

Robin glanced around him, then, raising to his lips the bugle-horn which hung from a worn leather baldric at his side, he winded a long call that rang through the forest, making the echoes ring and sending out its summons far and wide. 'Tan-tan-tran-trum-te-ran-tran,' sang the bugle-horn. 'Gather to me—gather to me—in orderly fashion—gather to me.'

Almost before Richard had swung down from his gilded saddle, the first men were coming in answer to that call. They came at an easy wolf-trot out into the glade, some of them with their dogs at their heels, and joined up into loose ranks with the score of outlaws who were already there.

Richard-the-Abbot stood beside Robin under the great lime-tree, with his own two men at his back, and watched the new-comers with the bright, intent gaze of one well used to judging the mettle of men. He saw men who had been serfs, and men who had been yeomen, and a few who had been knights and squires; but one and all, gently or simply born, bore the look of free men, trained and disciplined of their own free will.

As the minutes passed, more and more of them came into the glade; and Robin stood quietly watching them come, and speaking no word, until at last there were more than a hundred men standing in loosely ordered ranks half-way round the giant lime-tree. Then he glanced aside at his black-robed guest, saying with a quiet pride in his voice: 'That is the full tally, My Lord Abbot.'

Abbot Richard looked along the curved lines of men, from huge, yellow-haired Little John, to small, gnarled, brown Much-the-Miller's-Son; from grim, badger-haired Will Stukely to gay young Alan A'Dale.

'These are your men?' said he, in some wonderment. 'Trained by you?'

'These are my men,' Robin replied. 'But they have been trained by many masters. The wild things of the forest have taught them silence and wood-lore; hunger and danger have taught them to shoot straight and far; something they have learned from me, and much from each other. Their hatred of oppression and injustice they learned from *your* breed, My Lord Abbot, before ever they came to me.'

'It would seem that their many masters have taught them well,' said the abbot; 'for I never saw fighting men whose look pleased me better.'

Robin looked at him closely for a moment. 'It would seem that you are a true judge of men, Holy Father!'

'Even a churchman may be that,' replied the other, briefly.

For a moment longer Robin watched him, but there was nothing to be learned from the face half hidden beneath his cowl, and the outlaw turned away to the curved ranks of his men, crying: 'Lads, here is a messenger from the king himself, come to sup with us. Make him welcome, and his lesser brethren with him, for the sake of King Richard—and afterwards we will hear the message.'

With a shout the outlaws broke ranks and instant preparations for supper were begun.

So presently Abbot Richard beheld a meal such as could scarcely have been bettered in his own palace. The outlaws had raided store and treasury in honour of the king's messenger, and set out on the greensward beneath the lime-tree was a feast that was indeed fit for a king. Roast venison smoked upon silver chargers that were big enough for a knight's shield, and white bread and brown was brought in curiously folded napkins. Golden and purple wines of the south

glowed in flasks of silver beside nut-brown English ale in homely leather jacks; baked trout and all kind of river-fowl were there too, and many kinds of sweet preserves from the dark recesses of the store-pit.

Richard was just going to seat himself, wondering very much at the richness of the feast before him, when a stir among the outlaws caused him to look round, and he saw that three women had joined them. One of them was no longer young, though she looked as though she had once been very lovely to look upon; and she went to sit beside a thin, knightly looking man who was evidently her husband. The second was young, and of a fair and gentle prettiness, and she also went straight to her own man, who was as young and gay as she herself. But the third was the fairest of the three: tall and lance-straight in her kirtle of Lincoln green, with russet hair unhidden by any wimple, and laughter in her eyes; and she came swiftly to the side of Robin Hood himself.

Robin took her hand, and turning to his guest, said: 'My Lord Abbot, this is my dear lady.' Then to Marian: 'Sweetheart, the Holy Father here is a messenger from the king, and after we have fed him, he will give us his message.'

Marian gave him her hand with grave courtesy, but her face was troubled, and the laughter was gone from her eyes as she turned away and sat down at Robin's side between the spreading roots of the lime-tree. What message could the king be sending to such as they, that would not be an ill message? Surely he would not send them their pardon? What could it be, then, this message from the king?

The same question was in Robin's heart, too, and in the hearts of the wood-rangers. One and all of them were desperately eager to hear the king's message; but the forest had taught them patience, among its other lessons, and they showed no sign of their eagerness. And a very pleasant meal was that, eaten under the giant lime-tree. The outlaws and their dogs sat at ease in little groups in the cool shade that was large enough for all, while overhead the brown velvet bees droned among the pale lime-blossom, and outside in the evening sunshine of the open glade the grasshoppers kept up their ceaseless churring.

The two lesser brethren had been borne off by Will Scarlet and Roger Lightfoot to sit between them at a little distance. They were young and high-spirited, and having at last begun to enjoy themselves, they had also begun to forget the solemn behaviour which went with their black habits. Richard watched them a little anxiously at first; then he shrugged his shoulders and gave himself up to the enjoyment of the feast and the pleasant company.

When the meal was over, Robin took up his drinking horn brimming with cool brown ale, and looking round on his band, cried gaily: 'Lads! Here's a health to the king! Long life to him, and confusion to his enemies!'

'A health to the king!' shouted the wood-rangers, raising their ale-cans on high. 'Long life to him!'

'And confusion to his enemies!' said the strange abbot, drinking deep with the rest of them.

'Now,' said Robin, when the last toast had been drunk, 'your message, my Lord Abbot. Will you give us the message you bear from the king?'

'Nay,' replied the abbot, smoothly. 'First I would see some display of your men's archery, for I have often heard it said that in all broad England there are none who can draw the bow against Robin of Barnesdale and his band.'

Once again Robin looked at him quickly. This was surely no ordinary abbot; could he be a spy? Robin did not think so. He also was a judge of men, and he knew that spies did not carry themselves arrogantly, as this man did; and he had a clean, trustworthy feel about him. No, he was certainly not a spy. The outlaw chief would fain have heard the king's message, which would set his doubts at rest, and which might mean so much, for good or ill, to himself and his band; but whoever the abbot might really be, he was the king's messenger, and an honoured guest, and courtesy forbade Robin to press him further.

So he rose to his feet and called to the easeful figures of his band: 'Fetch your bows, lads; the good abbot would see your marksmanship. Set up the garlands at three hundred paces, John.'

'Yes, Master,' answered Little John, readily enough; but as he went to plant the newly peeled hazel wands, he pursed his mouth into a long, soundless whistle. Three hundred paces was a very great distance for accurate shooting.

The same thought was in the minds of the rest as they fetched and strung their bows. The best archers of the brotherhood had gathered into a knot at one end of the glade.

'Master Robin means to show the abbot and his brethren what Barnesdale archery can be!' muttered Will Scarlet to Much-the-Miller's-Son, as he bent his bow and slipped the loop of the string into place.

'Yes,' replied Much, 'and I never knew an abbot to take an interest in marksmanship before!'

'But then we never knew an abbot who was the king's messenger,' said Gilbert, his head bent close to Scarlet's. 'This is an odd thing, my brothers, a very odd thing!'

'Aye—and a messenger who will not give his message!' put in Will Stukely.

The outlaws looked at each other with questioning eyes. Who was this messenger? Was he truly an abbot—or some great lord in disguise? And, above all, what was the message which he brought but seemed so laggard to deliver?

'At least we will show him that the men of Barnesdale shoot straighter than the king's archers!' said Scarlet with a laugh, glancing down at the clothyard shafts in his belt.

Meanwhile, having paced out the range and stuck the peeled hazel-wand at either end, Little John was still whistling below his breath as he cut long blossom-laden sprays from a wild-rose bush which grew beside the stream, and twisted them into two rough garlands. When they were finished to his satisfaction he handed them over to Peterkin, who chanced to be near, bidding him hang them on the hazel-pricks; and himself went to join the knot of expert marksmen at the farther end of the glade.

Straying dogs were collected from the open glade by their various owners, and all was in readiness. Under the lime-tree the three women had gathered together; the two disguised lords sat side by side on the shady turf, like a couple of crows, in their black habits; and in the council seat, between the spreading roots of the lime, Robin and his strange, black-robed guest stood looking down on the assembled archers.

At a word from Robin, the first man stepped out to shoot. Every eye in the glade was turned upon Will Scarlet as he raised his bow, but no one watched more intently than the abbot. The arrow sped away down the sunlit glade,

humming as it flew, passed through the garland within a finger's breadth of the prick, and stood quivering in the trunk of an ash-tree beyond. Will Scarlet stepped back, and his place was taken by Gilbert.

Many times the arrows sped their course down or up the glade, thrumming in the warm air of the summer evening. Many times the bowmen passed and re-passed the watching figures beneath the trysting lime as they went from one mark to the other, collecting their spent arrows and turning to shoot back; but the abbot never lost interest. His eye was always upon the marksman of the moment, and his watchfulness was well rewarded: only twice in all that evening did an arrow fail to pass within the garland, and no less than seven times the prick was split neatly in two—the last time by Little John.

At last it was over. The marksmen slipped the strings from their bows, and the petals were already falling from the short-lived dog-rose garlands.

Then the abbot, who had watched in silence all the while, turned to Robin, saying warmly: 'I never saw bowmen to equal yours, friend outlaw. It seems a wicked thing that you and your band should be wasted here in the wilderness when England has need of true men!'

Robin of Barnesdale shrugged his shoulders. 'It was not of our own free will that we came to the wilderness,' said he.

'No, I know that it was not,' replied the other; 'and if I were to carry the king's pardon for you and your men, would you be loyal and true to him henceforth?'

For a moment Robin did not answer. He was looking away down the glade, where his men stood in groups, discussing the shooting that was past, while the evening shadows stole out from the forest and lay cool upon the sun-drenched turf. And suddenly he knew how much he had loved the life of the Greenwood with all its hardships and dangers. Then he felt Marian's hand slip into his, and he said: 'For myself, I would be a loyal man to the king. My lads must answer for themselves.'

'Ask them, then,' said the abbot.

So Robin lifted up his voice and called: 'Ho! Lads! Gather to me!'

The small groups broke up, and men came running from the farthest ends of the glade, the dogs, as ever, galloping at their heels, to stand in a wide half-circle before the trysting tree.

When they were assembled, Robin looked them over. 'Lads,' said he, 'if the Holy Father here were to bring you, each and every one, a free pardon from the king, would you be loyal men and true to him henceforth?'

A great shout went up from the outlaws. 'Yes! That we would!'

Abbot Richard waited, looking down at them, until they were quiet; then he put up his hands to the breast of his black habit. As the long sable folds parted, the astonished outlaws beheld the golden Leopards of England blazing on his scarlet surcoat. He thrust back the cowl from his head, and stood before them—the king!

For an instant there was an utter silence. Then Robin dropped on one knee at the king's feet. He was followed by every man of the brotherhood, so that King Richard found himself looking down on a crowd of kneeling figures with reverently bowed heads. 'It would seem that I have found loyal subjects in an unlikely place!' said he.

Some mornings later, Robin sat in his old place between the great roots of the lime-tree, while the brotherhood squatted three and four deep in a wide half-circle around him.

The king had given back to Sir Richard the lordship of Linden Lea; he had bestowed on Robin Hood the lordship of Locksley and Malaset, for Marian's father was lately dead. He had set right many other matters of a like kind; and bidden them wait three days, that their pardon might be proclaimed throughout the north country. Then he had returned to Doncaster, guided through the forest by a royal escort under the command of Little John.

Now the three waiting-days were over, and it was time to set out into the future. Robin had already shared out the contents of the treasury amongst his band, as best he might, and all of them would have money in their pouches with which to start their new lives. Now he looked round upon them, rather sadly.

'So, here's an end to our wolfshead days,' said he at last. 'We have our freedom to go and come as we will, and now our ways part.' Suddenly he rose and flung out his hands to them. 'Lads,' he cried, 'you who have been my brothers-in-arms—it has been a good life, this of the Greenwood, that we have lived together; and let us not forget it quite, when we be law-abiding subjects of the king.'

'We will not forget,' they answered. 'We will never forget.'

Many of them were in tears. They were free now, with no price on their heads, free to come and go as they would; and they were sad, because it was the end of the brotherhood, because it was good-bye. They would gladly have followed Robin still, but they knew he was no rich lord to support a host of henchmen; and even now, in their sadness, they were beginning to remember—some of them—well-loved plots of earth and valleys of dear remembrance, to which they would go back now, as free men; while others were beginning to feel the call of new adventure.

So they struck hands with Robin for the last time, bade farewell to old comrades, and whistled their dogs to heel; and in ones and twos and little groups they strode away into the forest, some heading for well-remembered villages that seemed to call them home, some outward bound to seek their fortunes in the ranks of the king's army.

Robin stood leaning on his bowstave, to watch them go: Much back to his mill, Friar Tuck to his hermitage, Will Scarlet marching gaily south to join the king's archers, Peterkin to the nearest hedge-tavern, with his bundle of balls and daggers under his arm.

The Lady Elizabeth took a tender farewell of the two younger women before she mounted her waiting horse and rode south beside her husband, with Diccon at her stirrup, and Simon the Squire trotting half a length behind.

Alice clung to Marian when it came to parting, weeping bitterly and swearing to come and see her often and often; then she tore herself away, and forgot her tears, to go with Alan to the little forest manor at Newstead, of which he had so often told her.

Marian stood very still beside Robin, and in a little while he turned from the deserted glade to look down at her with a rather sad smile.

'It is only you and I now, sweetheart,' said he.

'You and I, and one other,' she replied. 'Look behind you, my Robin.'

Wondering, he did as she bade him, and saw a gigantic figure standing a few paces off at the edge of the glade, waiting patiently to be noticed.

‘John,’ said Robin, very gently, ‘I had thought you half-way to Cumberland before this!’

Little John came to him slowly. ‘And why should I be for Cumberland, Robin?’

‘Because it was from Cumberland that you came when first you joined our band, and often I have known you homesick for your native fells; so now that the band is no more, where should you go, save back to Cumberland?’

Little John set a huge hand on Robin’s shoulder, and shook his head slowly. ‘I go where you go,’ he said simply. ‘We be brothers—you and I.’

‘We be brothers—you and I,’ answered Robin. ‘That is a true word, Little John. We ride for Locksley together, then, the three of us.’

So in a little while they set out, Robin riding one of their two remaining horses, with Marian on the saddle-bow before him, and John, mounted on a raw-boned mare, half a length in the rear.

Behind them the Stane Ley was silent and deserted. Soon the little wooden cabins and the turf-roofed stables would fall into decay, and brambles and virgin’s bower and many-tendrilled ivy would cover the ruins, fresh grass would spring up through the black scars of the cooking fires; and the Stane Ley would be just as any other of the many glades of Barnesdale Forest.

How Robin came back to the Greenwood

AT FIRST IT seemed very strange to Robin to find himself Lord of the Manors of Locksley and Malaset, where he had spent so much of his boyhood on his uncle's farm, and stranger still to be the master of that strong grey castle, standing guard over its quiet dales between Barnesdale Forest and the Peak. Yet he had ever loved Locksley village, and now it seemed to welcome him home again.

The folk were old friends, most of them; the younger men had been boys with him, the ancient ones had been cronies of his uncle Stephen, who was now dead; even the dogs were the descendants of those he had known in boyhood. And he had other friends too, dumb yet faithful, to make him welcome: the grinning gargoyles above the west door of the church, the great tithe-barn where the white owls nested and reared their young every year, a certain hollow lime-tree on the borders of Locksley Chase; these, and many more.

Within the castle he was not so happy. Used as he was to the broad glades and leafy ways of the forest, he felt caged and shut in by the strong grey curtain-walls; and the stars which had been his friends when he slept beside his fire in the Stane Ley seemed less friendly when seen through the window-embrasures of the great keep. But to Marian, the Castle of Malaset was very dear, for it was her home; and as time went by Robin came to love it also, at first for Marian's sake, but later for its own.

During the last years of the old lord's life, he had sadly neglected his possessions, and all that he owned had fallen into decay; and now it fell to Robin and his Lady, with the faithful Little John to aid them, to set matters right, both within the castle itself and throughout the demesne and manor. The hovels of the villeins were put in good repair, and the neglected land slowly put to rights; new trees were planted in the chase, where old ones had fallen, and long-derelict wind-breaks replanted with hawthorn and quickset. Robin—ever a farmer, even after his landless years of outlawry—planted willows in the wet bottom where nothing else would grow, and bought new oxen to replace the worn-out beasts in the plough-team; and above all, he made friends with his serfs and villeins, so that they worked for him willingly and gladly, as they had never done for Fitzwater.

Inside Malaset Castle the same thing was going on. Stables and kennels were put into repair, guardroom and armoury set to rights. There were several casts of hawks in the mews, where there had been nothing for many a long day save a crazy goshawk in perpetual moult.

Little John descended upon the men-at-arms in the guardroom, denounced them for lazy slovens and good-for-nothings, and set about driving into them the

discipline that the brotherhood of the Greenwood had learned so well. They grumbled for a time, sullenly resentful at being roused out of the lazy ways they had drifted into when the old lord was in his dotage; but Little John's good-tempered friendliness—and the strength of his right arm—soon won them over to his way of thinking.

Meanwhile, Marian was replenishing the store-rooms, and caused the faded walls of the bower to be painted lime-leaf green and flecked with golden stars, made friends with her house-varlets and hand-maids, and set to work on the herb-plot and garden that had been left to run riot since she went to Robin in the Greenwood. She had a way with plants, as she had with people, and under her skilful hands the tiny rose garden below the south tower soon began to bloom again.

The great Castle of Malaset was fully awake once more, and full of a coming and going of servants and men-at-arms, as it had been in older days. Robin kept open house, as the Saxon gentry had always done; and many were the guests who found warm shelter and a good meal beneath the smoke-blackened roof of his great hall.

Sir Richard-at-Lea came sometimes, and sometimes Alan A'Dale; more often Sir Hugh de Staunton would ride over from his own manor to spend a few days hunting with Robin in Locksley Chase. Often a weary knight-errant would claim hospitality, and almost always there were guests of a poorer sort—men-at-arms and archers tramping home from service overseas, brown-skinned sailor-lads bound from one port to another, dusty palmers from the Holy Land, yeomen on a journey, pedlars and friars and strolling minstrels. All these were sure of a welcome, and help if they had need of it; but most welcome of all, by far, were stray members of the brotherhood, who sometimes came to sit at Robin's table. They would come quietly and sit among the men-at-arms far down the lower tables, but none ever came that his old leader did not at once recognize. Then Robin would go striding down the hall to wring his hand, bid him welcome, and demand his news. So Robin of Barnesdale never quite lost touch with his old life or the men who had lived it with him.

They were happy years, those at Malaset. Robin and Little John laboured hard to make the manor prosperous and keep it so. Marian worked as hard as either of them, for it was no easy thing to be the Lady of a great Manor. But all three of them loved their task; and they had their pleasures too: days of hunting and hawking in Locksley Chase, with the russet leaves lying thick underfoot and the frosty distance as blue as wood-smoke; long winter evenings when the wind roared against the ramparts, and the great hall was a place of warmth and flickering light where guests and men-at-arms and dogs crowded to the blazing fire while some wandering minstrel plucked his lute and sang to them of love or war or hunting.

Best of all, perhaps, were summer evenings in the rose-garden. Marian loved the rose-garden better than any other place in the castle, and because she loved it, Robin loved it too. It was but a tiny square of turf in the sunny corner between the great keep and the south tower, a turf seat starred with speedwell and wild thyme, pansies and gilly-flowers underfoot, and a thick hedge of roses all around—white roses that smelled like honey, crimson roses whose scent was dark and warm like their own petals, tiny pink single blossoms that Marian used for

distilling rose-water. That was all, but the rose-hedge seemed to shut out the world, so that the little grass plot within was enchanted ground, like the centre of a fairy ring; and here Robin and Marian would often sit of a summer evening, while the yellow sunshine gave place to blue dimness, and the gay butterflies of the day-time to pale-winged night moths.

Sixteen years slipped away; happy years for the folk in Malaset, but hard ones for England.

Richard Cœur de Lion was dead before the ramparts of Chaluz, and his brother John now ruled in his place; and oppression and injustice were let loose in the land once more. For if John had been a brutal tyrant during the years when Richard was crusading or in prison, he was far worse now that he himself was king; and he had not been long on the throne before he made himself the most hated king that England had ever known. The poor folk had always hated and feared him for his cruelty and ruthlessness; but now the clergy and the barons were coming to hate him too—the clergy because he refused to obey church rulings and gave their fat possessions to prelates whom he brought in from overseas; the barons because he wrested from them their ancient rights and forced them to pay out most of their wealth to keep him in money for his constant wars. The few barons who yet clung to him for hope of power were behaving much as they had done when King Richard was abroad, wrenching from the poor all that they possessed, and making honest folks' lives a burden to them; and between them and those lords and barons who were turning against the king there began to be constant quarrels and small private wars.

Little cared King John for the misery of his people; and he brought in foreign mercenaries to hold down and quell their growing discontent. But slowly, as the years went by, the wrath of the English was growing stronger than the tyranny of their king.

In the spring of 1215 the barons gathered at Brackley in Northamptonshire, and there they drew up a Great Charter of Englishmen's rights, knowing that if they could but force the king to sign it and abide by his signature, it would break his tyranny for ever. Far and wide they sent, summoning free men to join them, and from far and wide free men answered the call. Then, having sent word of their coming to the king, they marched south under the banners of Fitzwalter, William Marshal, and Stephen Langton; a great and glorious army of lords and barons, knights and squires, each with his following of fighting men. And with them marched Robin Hood and Sir Hugh de Staunton.

It was in the chill dawn of a May morning when Robin marched out of Malaset, with Little John beside him, and close on a hundred fighting men at his back. He looked back once, and saw Marian standing high above him on the ramparts, her crimson kirtle gay in the first sunshine, and the wind teasing her hair from beneath her wimple. She flung up her hand to him, and he waved back; then he turned his face towards the high moors.

He never saw Marian alive again.

Hugh de Staunton was waiting for him by the Mark Stones a few miles west of Mansfield, with a goodly company of men-at-arms, and they went on together to join the gathering of the barons' army at Brackley.

Southward rolled the host, down from Northamptonshire into the rich valleys of Buckinghamshire, and up over the rolling Berkshire Downs, pennants

streaming, weapons and armour glinting in the warm spring sunshine, shields and surcoats and horse-trappings of blue and crimson, green and gold, sable and silver, all powdered over by the great rolling dust-cloud stirred up by the horses' hooves and the feet of marching men.

The king met them at Runnymede, in a smouldering rage that boded ill for the charter. June had come, and his bright silken pavilions were pitched in a meadow that was gay with clover and lady's-smock, the Thames ran sparkling at the field's end, singing blithely through the brown-flowered rushes on its banks, and cuckoos shouted from coppices far and near. But the king's brow was black and sullen, and though he signed the charter with as good a grace as possible, it was only fear of the barons massed in arms against him that made him do so. And the ink was scarcely dry on the parchment before he was thinking how he could most easily break the promises that he had made.

The barons knew King John of old, and their knowledge had not taught them to trust him; so a large part of the host remained in the south to keep watch and ward over the charter that meant so much to Englishmen; and among those who stayed were Robin and Sir Hugh.

But King John's treachery was swift, and it was yet early autumn when news reached them of foreign hordes in the king's pay landing at all the north coast ports: of Flemings, Saxons, and Brabanters pouring through the north country, pillaging and burning as they went.

Then the northern barons hurried north again to defend their lands, Sir Hugh among them; and with Sir Hugh, Robin and his men took the York road once more.

On a misty October day when the golden bracken was deepening to russet, the two little companies left the Sheffield track and swung up into the high moors between Sherwood and the Peak. At their head marched Robin, the grey milky light glinting on his ring-mail; and his face was grim and set beneath his steel cap. They had passed through three burned-out villages that morning—silent villages with dead men and women lying among the blackened ruins of their homes, and his heart was sick in his breast with fear for Marian, alone in Malaset with only the serfs and a handful of men-at-arms for its defence.

Little John marched beside him, scarcely less grim than he, and on his left strode Sir Hugh de Staunton, his face bleak, and the old scar on his cheek leaden-grey with weariness. The three had marched their men forward relentlessly on that long road from London, and there was not a man in the ranks behind them who was not utterly worn out. But they held on doggedly, the weary miles paying out behind them; and now only the last lift of the moors lay between them and the end of the long forced march, and they pressed forward with their eyes straining ahead of them for any blur of smoke against the evening sky.

On they went, up and over that high moorland crest, and dropped down on the farther side, following the sandy track that wound down towards the wide dale of Malaset; and as the track dropped more steeply valley-ward, Robin lengthened his stride and the weary men behind him quickened almost to a run.

Where the track swung round a last shoulder of the moor, the Lord of Malaset came to a sudden halt. The dale opened before him—quiet farmland between the high moorland fells and the dark verge of Locksley Chase where the evening

shadows were already gathering like smoke among the trees. A mile away across the fields the village lay very quiet too, with the quietness of desolation upon it; nothing moved save the faint smoke that drifted upward from the blackened ruins of its homesteads. Beyond, the great keep of Malaset stood upreared against the evening sky, seemingly untouched by the desolation below it, but in the fading light the open ground before the castle was a-swarm with figures, and even as Robin watched, red fire sprang up from the timbers of the gate-house, and a distant uproar came faintly to his ears.

He gave one sharp, savage cry, and began to run, slipping his bowstave from his shoulders as he ran. Little John and Sir Hugh were beside him, and the rest came storming at their heels. Across the farmland they raced, weary men who had forgotten their weariness, over crisp pasture and frost-hardened plough, and came at last into the blackened ruins of Malaset village, each man freeing his bow as he ran.

King John's mercenaries had gained the causeway after a hard fight for it; they had stormed the gates, and now a mortal struggle was raging around the burning gate-house where the little, gallant band of defenders stood at bay behind their hastily-flung-up barricades. The marauders had thought to gain an easy victory, for serfs and villeins and a bare handful of men-at-arms were no match for close on two hundred heavily armed soldiery. But the Englishmen were strengthened by the knowledge that they defended their own womenfolk, their own children—for the villagers had all flown for shelter to the castle as soon as warning of the raid came to them, and now the inner bailey was full of children and dogs and cattle, while in the outer court the women toiled to and fro, tending the wounded, carrying sheaves of arrows to the few bowmen in the archers' gallery, aiding their menfolk at the barriers.

Again and again the foreigners strove to break through into the courtyard; again and again they were hurled back. The defenders were fighting with the grim, desperate courage of the wild boar that had been their forefathers' battle-crest, and already the barrier was strengthened by the bodies of dead Flemings and Brabanters; while from the arrow-slits overhead ever and anon there whistled down a cloth-yard shaft, to find its home in some foreign heart.

But the bravest defence could not last for long against such odds; there were English dead piled beside the Brabanters in the gateway, and many of those who still lived were wounded sore.

Once more, with a savage yell, the mercenaries charged. And in that moment came a deep whistling hum, an angry sound like that of a disturbed hornets' nest; but it was a flight of grey-goose shafts, and not of hornets, that drove into the rear ranks of the Brabanters.

The daylight was waning fast, but the flames of the burning gate-house lit the scene with a ruddy glare and made a clear target of the men who had kindled the blaze. Many were down, dead and wounded, under that first flight, and a second followed it, before a man's heart might pound twice, slaying their captain and spreading confusion among the rest; and almost before they could turn about to face the new menace, their attackers were upon them.

Robin could never afterwards remember much of that fight. He did not know that the struggle was long and bitter, or that the defenders of Malaset had dragged aside their own barricades and rushed out to add their strength to his. He

did not know, until Sir Hugh told him afterwards, that scarce a dozen of King John's cut-throats had escaped with their lives from that evening's work. There seemed to be a red mist heating behind his eyes, and he knew nothing save the scarlet flash of his sword reflecting the flames of the burning gate-house and the savage joy of feeling the blade bite deep.

Then it was all over and the red mist ebbed away; the fierce joy died in him, and he found himself standing in the ruined gateway, his sword naked and blooded in his hand. Men were dousing the fire with water from the castle well, and as the flames died down the thick reek of sodden smitch filled the air. It was almost dark until someone brought a torch, and by its light he saw dead men sprawling all across the gateway and the causeway-head, English and Fleming, attackers and defenders together.

His serfs crowded about him where he stood in the gate-way, and he saw Little John bending over a fallen comrade and Sir Hugh de Staunton leaning against the wall and dabbing at a gash that had partly opened the old scar on his cheek; and he looked about for Marian, but could not see her.

But from the throng he picked out Rafe-the-Archer, chief of the few who had been left to guard Malaset while its lord was away, and demanded: 'Rafe, where is my lady?'

Then he saw the trouble in the man's eyes; and he knew. With a strange, cold calm upon him he followed Rafe up the narrow stone stairway that led to the archers' gallery. The clouds of the day had begun to break up and stream away eastward before the light wind that was rising, and through their shreds and tatters the sky showed green as a witch ball and gemmed with the first stars. But the archers' gallery was sheltered from the wind behind its frowning, arrow-slitted rampart-wall, and the torch which one of the bowmen was holding aloft burned steadily, shedding a saffron glow over stone wall and timber flooring, and the figures of the archers who had so lately defended the castle. One sat propped against the wall, while a comrade knelt over him to cut the arrow-barb from his shoulder; one stood staring out through his loophole, with his hand clenched on his bowstave so tight that the knuckles shone white. The rest stood with bowed heads around one of their number who lay still.

They parted silently to let Robin through, and he found himself looking down on Marian, with a cross-bow quarrel in her heart. Her bow lay beside her, and she was clad as the other archers, in leggings and worn leather jack; but they had taken off her steel cap, and her russet hair flowed softly round her face and shoulders, shining warm in the torchlight.

For a long time Robin looked in silence, and then he turned away without a word. They bore Marian to her bower and laid her on the bed; and Robin went back to his wounded men.

There was much to be done that night, and Robin strode from place to place, unceasingly, seeming unable to be still a moment, a man with eyes like bright, blue glass in an ash-grey face; and the men who saw him that night never forgot his look.

But in the darkest hour he went back to the chamber where Marian lay, and knelt down beside the bed; and there he remained, while the grey dawn filtered into the room and the yellow sunshine followed it and streamed down from the high window in a shower of gold that lay gently across Marian's body.

Then he bestirred himself and got to his feet, slowly, like one who is very tired. Stooping, he kissed her on the forehead; then went quietly from the room and down the winding stair and out into the rose-garden that she had loved so well. The sun had not reached it as yet and the little grass plot was grey with hoar-frost, but in the rose-hedge the last crimson buds of summer were opening to the morning.

Robin went to the turf seat and cast himself down full length upon it, burying his head in his arms; and lying there, fell into a terrible silent grieving.

Some while after, Little John found him there, and stood looking down at him for a few moments, his own heart near to breaking, and then went quietly away again.

Three days later Marian was laid to rest among her own people in the little churchyard at Malaset. Long after the soft warm earth had been piled back into her grave, long after the sorrowing villagers had crept away, Robin stood with Little John beside him, gazing down at the newly replaced sods; while a few paces off stood Sir Hugh de Staunton, his head bent and his hands crossed on the pommel of his sword.

Little John's heart ached for Robin; he longed to comfort him, but he knew that not even he had the right to break in upon him in his grief; so he waited, dumbly, patiently, like a great hound, his eyes fixed on his master's face. And presently, Robin lifted his head and turned to look away—north-eastward, towards the dim blue shores of Barnesdale Forest.

'John,' said he, speaking slow, and very quietly, 'I am through with respectability. It is the Greenwood again for me, old lad.'

'And what of Malaset, Master Robin, and what of Locksley?'

For a little while Robin made no reply; then said he: 'They will go to Sir Hugh, for he is nearest kin to Marian; and all will be well with the manor in his hands.' He turned to the knight standing near: 'It is a sorry heritage, Hugh; and a hard task you will have, to build it up again.'

'Never mind for that,' said Sir Hugh, quickly. 'But need you leave it? Need you go back to your old landless ways? Stay here and build the manor up again yourself.'

Robin shook his head. '*You* can do that as well as I; and there is work waiting for me in the Greenwood.'

The two looked each other levelly between the eyes, and Sir Hugh understood. With tyranny and injustice rampant once more, and the king's hired cut-throats roaming loose through the land, there was need of Robin Hood again in his old haunts and his old way of life.

'Then it is good-bye?' asked Sir Hugh.

'God speed,' replied Robin.

They struck hands, standing there beside Marian's grave; and Sir Hugh Staunton turned and strode away.

'You're going at once, Robin?' asked Little John; and his voice was harsh with grief as he laid a heavy arm across the other's shoulders.

'Aye, at once. Do I travel alone, John?'

'No,' said Little John. 'Not alone. I have been your man for thirty years, Robin lad, and I am your man still.'

‘So be it then. You’re a very faithful friend, Little John, and I never needed your friendship more than I need it now.’ He turned away, and without one backward glance towards the quiet place where Marian lay, he strode out of the churchyard and headed for the ruined castle gateway.

The sun was still high in the heavens when the two rode out from Malaset for the last time. Robin was mounted on a tall black hunter; buckler and bowstave were strapped between his shoulders, and he wore his old, weather-stained leather jack, and a light steel cap upon his head; and he looked neither to right nor to left as he rode. Half a length behind him, on a heavily built mare, rode Little John, also in buff and steel, with a bundle of faded Lincoln green on the saddle before him.

And the villagers, watching them go, knew in their hearts that they would not see Robin of Barnesdale again.

Skirting the northern side of Locksley Chase, they took to the waste that lay between it and the distant verge of the forest. The bracken was a tawny sea that flowed against the horses’ legs as they passed; and the scent of frost was in the air, and the scent of sunshine, and the little moorland pools reflected the milky blueness of the autumn sky.

It was a fair and joyous world, but the two who rode through it that blue-and-golden noontide had no eye for the moorland pools nor ear for the plover’s calling.

On they went, riding steadily north-east through the sunshine until at last the dun shadows of Barnesdale Forest closed about them, and Locksley and Malaset knew them no more.

How Robin fought Guy of Gisborne

NOT LONG WAS Robin alone with Little John in the Stane Ley; for the very day after they rode away from Malaset came Martin-the-Ploughman and Rafe-the-Archer, eager to take service with him.

Robin sat in his old place on the turf-hummock between the spreading roots of the lime-tree, and looked at the two who stood sturdily before him with their small supply of worldly goods in bundles at their feet.

‘It is a hard life that you will have, if you follow me,’ he told them, ‘And Sir Hugh de Staunton is a good master and will treat you well. Will you not go back to your homes, and serve him?’

‘Us knows Sir Hugh for a good master,’ said Rafe. ‘But us wants no other master than you, Robin of Barnesdale.’

So they remained in the glade of the giant lime-tree, and the brotherhood had begun to grow again.

As the news of Robin Hood’s return to the Greenwood spread out through the countryside, men gathered to him as they had done in days of yore, and amongst them came a handful of the old brotherhood that had been disbanded sixteen years ago. Many of the original outlaws had taken wives and settled down, some were too old to take to the old life of the wilderness again; some were dead, and some overseas fighting with the armies of King John in France. Will Scarlet had died gallantly at the siege of Chaluz on the same day that Richard Cœur de Lion had died. Roger Lightfoot and George-a-Green had fallen side by side, each with a French crossbow quarrel in his heart. Ket-the-Smith had a fine smithy down Birkland way, and was in no mind to turn adventurous again. Hob-o’-the-Hoar-Oak had gathered together a fat little farm over towards Lincoln, and was too old for further service.

But Arthur-a-Bland came, and Brand, and Will-the-Bowman, greyer and more grim and soldierly than ever. One morning the little band awoke to find Much-the-Miller’s-Son in their midst—browner, smaller, more gnarled and bent of shoulder even than they remembered him, but bright-eyed and wiry as ever. One evening Gilbert walked into camp and sat down beside the fire as though he had never been away: Gilbert, tanned by foreign suns, and with the scar of a pike wound livid on the brown skin of his forearm. So it went on.

These veterans formed the core of a new brotherhood which was growing up around the trysting tree. Slowly it grew, but surely, until, within two years of his coming back to the Greenwood, Robin had some four-score men at his command. They were strongly armed and true-hearted, these men of the new brotherhood, as the men of old had been; and the folk of all the forest country were in sore need of such aid and championship as theirs. King John was dead, it

is true—dead of poison at Newark; but the new king was only a child, and the wrongs that John had brought about were unrighted. Flemings, Brabanters, Saxons, and Poitevins still roamed the country—a vast, marauding army. Cottage homes and stately castles alike were plundered and left in smoking ruins by these king's men; and the prints of their mailed feet on the land were ruined homes and dead men—aye, and women and children too.

Against these foreign hordes Robin and his men made constant war; they hung about on the flanks of the king's armies, like a grey wolf-pack, cutting off raiding parties; harrying the foreigners by every means in their power. And many the poor knight and yeoman and humble serf, and many the anxious woman, who had cause to bless Robin Hood and his men during those troubled years.

Robin seemed to love fighting now, more than ever he had done in the days of his youth. In the hot excitement of danger, in the giving and taking of blows and the pitting of his wits against the cunning of his enemies, he could forget his loneliness and loss. And at that time he had as much fighting as even he could wish for. Nor were the king's mercenaries his only foes. . . .

Roger of Doncaster had been turned out of his lands by King Richard, in the same year that Robin had received his pardon. He had fled from the country, to Normandy, where he had other estates to live upon; but when John came to the throne he had returned to his English lands, and sat there, like a bird of prey, gathering about him a band of hired robbers and cut-throats who drifted from the king's service to follow him for the better pay he offered.

Robin was yet in Malaset in those days, with Marian beside him; and Roger of Doncaster heard tales of their happiness and prosperity, and his old jealousy grew strong within him. He had not dared to pit himself against Robin Hood in the open, knowing that the other had a strong following among the poor folk, well-trained men-at-arms in his castle, and powerful friends among the knights and lords of the countryside; but he waited, biding his time and nursing his jealousy until it grew bitter as gall within him.

For twenty years and more he brooded on his hatred against the man who had taken Marian from him and spoiled his greedy plans for possessing himself of her wealth and lands; and now that Robin had taken to the Greenwood once more, he bethought himself that the time for him to take his revenge had surely come.

To this end he made common cause with Sir Guy of Gisborne—long since turned out of his stewardship of Birkencar by a new Abbot of St. Mary's—and between them they plotted Robin's downfall. Several times during the years after Robin's return to the Greenwood did those two comrades-in-evil send their Poitevin cut-throats to ambush him in the woods. They might as well have tried to net a peregrine falcon as it stooped between them and the sun. No man ever yet found Robin of Barnesdale in his own forest, when he was not minded to be found. Only, as they returned from their fruitless expeditions, would an arrow humming from the depths of some thicket show them how near they had been to their quarry.

Things went on in this way until a certain day in early autumn, seven years after Robin had come back to Barnesdale. It was a very still day, golden as the first days of autumn often are, with the weary green of late summer still to be seen among the gold, though the first hoar-frost rimed the grass in the shadow of

rick and tree and hedgerow. In the open country the last of the harvest had been got in, and apples were red on the trees in garden plots; in the depth of Barnesdale Forest the dun leaves had begun to fall and the brambles were laden with berries that were still green and crimson.

A few miles to the west of Barnesdale Bar, Robin and Little John were making their way along a forest path just broad enough for them to walk abreast. Both were clad in tunic and hose of well-worn Lincoln green, Little John with the hood of his capuchin pulled over his head and its liripipe jauntily a-swing as he walked, Robin with a wild swan's flight-feather as jauntily stuck in his close velvet cap.

Little John carried his seven-foot bowstave, and had deadly clothyard shafts in his quiver; but the bowstave in Robin's hand was that of a small birding-bow, and the arrows thrust into his belt were light, slender things, little more than half a clothyard; for although their ways lay together until the bridle-path branched, they were not bound upon the same errand.

On they went, walking shoulder to shoulder in companionable silence, until the path dived into a thicket of hawthorn, spindle, and wayfaring trees, all gay with ripening autumn berries, and emerging into a little clearing beyond branched to Wentbridge and Barnesdale Bar. An elder-tree grew just where the track divided, and a speckled thrush which was feasting on its dark berries flew off with a loud alarm-note at their approach, but waited to scold at them from a safe distance. Little John scolded back, then laughed softly in his throat. 'Nay, Brother Throstle, why so churlish?'

The two men parted; a moment later both had sunk into the forest, and in the little clearing the thrush had returned to his interrupted feast among the laden branches of the elder-tree.

Robin left the path within a bowshot of where it branched, and struck south-east through the forest towards a certain tract of heath-land that abounded in plover.

Little John followed his path for a mile or so, then he too struck away into the forest, heading northward for Pomfret Town.

The day before, Barnaby and a young wood-ranger named Andrew had set out for Pomfret to gather tidings of a certain wealthy silk merchant who would soon be travelling the Selby road. Now, Little John walked the same way; and in a certain glade some miles south of the town, Andrew was to meet him at noon, with any tidings that had been gathered during the night.

Northward strode Little John, blithely enough, and he came presently to the appointed glade. Andrew was not there, but it was scarcely noon as yet, and after a quick glance round, the tall outlaw propped his back against the trunk of a chestnut-tree and settled himself to wait. At first he waited patiently, thumbs tucked into his belt and gazing straight before him at nothing in particular; but as time went by, and there was still no sign of the young outlaw, there appeared a worried frown between Little John's brows.

At last he thrust himself from the chestnut trunk, and after pausing for a moment, head turned to listen for any sound of the missing man's approach, walked quickly across the clearing and disappeared among the trees on the farther side. He was going to see what had become of young Andrew—and of old Barnaby, too, for if ill had befallen one, it had probably befallen both.

A few miles brought him to the head of Kinly Scar—a deep, narrow gully, thickly wooded and leading gently down between the high, steep shaws of the forest. Into the scar dropped Little John, and made his way down towards the forest verge; and there, among the wild fruit-trees of the woodshore, he halted a moment to view the lay of the land.

Before him lay a wide, shallow dale, the open turf slopes dotted here and there with stately trees; and not a bowshot from where he stood at the mouth of the gully, the highway curved southward on its way from Pomfret to Doncaster. Beside the highway rose the blue smoke of a cooking fire, with a large company of men encamped about it: a peaceful scene it was, but while Little John watched from the woodshore the peace was rudely broken by a sudden outbreak of shouting that arose from the men about the fire; and two figures broke away and came running clumsily towards him, with a yelling mob of men-at-arms behind them.

Little John knew the hunters for Roger of Doncaster's Poitevin cut-throats by the device on their surcoats; and a moment later he recognized the hunted also, and saw that their hands were bound behind them. Andrew and Barnaby had met with trouble, even as he had feared. Setting the heel of his bowstave against his instep, he bent it and slipped the silken string into place. Next instant he had nocked an arrow to the string and stepped out from the forest.

The two fugitives, hampered as they were by their bound hands, were losing ground steadily. John shouted to them at the full pitch of his lungs, encouraging them as though they were hounds. 'Andrew! Barnaby! To me, lads! Sweff! Sweff!'

The two heard him, and making valiant efforts to increase their speed they began to draw away from their pursuers. Then one of the archers among the men-at-arms halted for an instant, raised his bow, and loosed deliberately after the fugitives. It was a good shot. Barnaby stumbled, recovered himself, and ran on, staggering in his tracks. Little John bent his bow, with no show of haste, and sped his arrow; and the over-skilful archer threw up his arms and fell, rolling over like a shot rabbit, with a clothyard shaft in his throat.

Little John began to run towards the two outlaws, nocking another arrow to his string, and loosing into the thick of the pursuers. The three met a little away from the forest verge, and in the moment of their meeting Barnaby pitched down headlong, and Little John saw the arrow embedded between his shoulders.

The young outlaw hesitated for an instant, and then ran on toward the shelter of the forest. John wasted no glance on him, but stepped across Barnaby's body, and casting down his bow—for the pursuit was now too near for him to use it—drew his sword.

Barnaby stirred, and rolled half over, gasping urgently: 'Run, John! A'God's name run!'

Little John answered nothing; there was no time. He brought up his sword, and next instant the Poitevin pack closed around him; and among the trampling legs of the fighters, Barnaby sighed, and rolled forward on to his face, to move no more.

Little John put up a savage fight, standing astride the body of his fallen comrade, head and shoulders taller than the cut-throats who hurled themselves upon him like hunting-dogs upon a boar. Five of their number he slew that day,

but they disarmed him at last and dragged him down, bleeding from a deep wound in his shoulder and others on his head and sword-arm, yet struggling to the end. Some of them flung themselves upon him to hold him down, while others dragged his arms behind his back and lashed his wrists together; then, jerking him to his feet, they urged him over to an elm-tree not far from their fire.

To the trunk of this elm they bound Little John by ropes that passed several times round both trunk and man and were made fast by cunning knots. He was sick and dizzy, and when he raised his head it seemed very heavy, and the wide dale swam in his sight. A knight with a white, smooth face, who had evidently kept himself well clear of the fighting, was standing before him, staring insolently into his face; and Little John lifted his head higher with a tremendous effort, and stared haughtily back. By the device on the knight's shield and surcoat he knew him for Roger of Doncaster.

'You should be Little John, judging by your size,' said the knight, in a voice as smooth as silk and bitter as gall. 'Excepting only your master, there is no man I would sooner hang than you, you vermin! And hang you I most assuredly shall, this day!'

'That is as God wills,' answered the other, proudly.

'No, no—it is as *I* will,' said Sir Roger of Doncaster, and his lips twisted into a smile that was half a snarl. Turning to the men-at-arms, he ordered: 'Bind me up this hedge-knight's cuts, for he bleeds like a stuck pig, and I would not have him die before Sir Guy returns from his errand to see him hanged.'

So Little John's wrists were unbound, and the wounds in his arm and shoulder roughly bandaged with strips torn from his own hood, and afterwards his hands were re-bound in front of him instead of behind, that the strain might not again open the wound in his shoulder.

While this was being done, certain others of the men-at-arms, under the directions of Sir Roger, were running a stout hempen rope over one of the branches of the elm-tree, and making a noose in one end of it, in readiness for the hanging which would take place as soon as Sir Guy of Gisborne was there to enjoy it.

When all was done, they settled themselves to wait. Sir Roger seated himself on a great fallen branch, where he could watch his captive to his heart's content; and his men sat or lounged about on the turf, tending the fire that they had lighted to cook their noonday meal and while away the time of waiting, talking among themselves in their own tongue, staring insolently at Little John, and—those of them who had taken scathe in the fighting—attending to their hurts.

Bound to his tree, Little John waited also, wondering how long it would be before Guy of Gisborne returned from his unknown errand. If he delayed long enough, it might yet be that rescue would arrive in time; for Andrew would have gone straight back to the Stane Ley and raised the outlaws to his aid. But the Stane Ley was the best part of ten forest miles away, and at any moment the hated figure of Guy of Gisborne might appear between the boles of the trees. So, weighing up his chances, the outlaw faced the fact that there was not one chance in a hundred that he would see the sun go down that evening.

It had been a good life, he thought, and now it was over. He lifted his heavy head and gazed away down the sweep of the dale, which still swam oddly in his sight, watching the late September sunshine upon the hills, for the last time.

There was an intruder in the forest that day—a strange, fantastic figure that lurked among the undergrowth, skulking through the thickets like an evil spirit, or some creature out of a nightmare.

Many times Sir Guy of Gisborne had sent his cut-throats questing into the woods after Robin Hood, and always they had bungled the business. This time he had come himself, clad in a disguise which should give him an unquestioned right of way wherever he went, by striking terror into the heart of any whose path he chanced to cross. For who would dispute the right of way with the Phantom Horse of Barnesdale?

He had come only to spy, to carry back word of the outlaw band and its whereabouts to Sir Roger of Doncaster and the waiting men-at-arms, that they might know where to attack. Yet he carried a serviceable six-foot bow in case of need, and before long he was to use it.

For as he skulked beneath the earth-clogged roots of a fallen forest-giant, his eye was drawn to a flicker of movement between the trees. He stiffened, his face alight with a savage eagerness, and rose silently to his feet, taking care to keep himself well hidden by the hazel-scrub from someone coming up the narrow deer-path, and nocked an arrow to his bowstring.

Robin came swinging up the path, his birding-bow in his hand and a brace of plover in the other. He heard the twang of a released bowstring in the thicket to his left, and a hot brand seemed to sear his left forearm. The murderous arrow smacked into the turf, and instantly Robin pitched down sideways into a thick mass of brambles and old-man's-beard, landing on top of the shaft and breaking it off in his fall. He contrived to twist over in landing, and lay still, watching between the gold and russet bramble leaves for the coming of his would-be murderer.

The terrible creature that a moment later came leaping out from the undergrowth was enough to strike terror into the boldest heart. The Phantom Horse of Barnesdale! The phantom horse that was yet in some strange and horrible way also a man, and which boded death to all who chanced to see it!

The black mane and crest swept against the gold-and-green woods as the creature leapt down into the path; the savage teeth gleamed in the hideously up-reared head.

Robin was no superstitious villain, but his heart gave a sickening lurch into his throat, and he knew one instant of goose-fleshed horror. Next moment he realized that the phantom of the forest was a man clad in a horse's hide, with the vicious head pulled forward over his own in the manner of a hood; and as the wild figure came dashing towards him, he saw that the dark brutal face which showed under that of the horse was the face of his ancient enemy—Guy of Gisborne.

Very still lay Robin, with his right hand tensed on the grip of his sword; and an instant later Sir Guy reached the place where the outlaw's feet stuck stiffly out into the path, and checked his headlong rush, to stand looking down at them. His face was full of evil triumph, and hatred was in the cold glitter of his eyes.

'There you lie, Robin of Barnesdale!' said he, in a grating voice. 'I have waited a long time for this reckoning, and now that it has come at last, I shall sleep the better in my bed of nights, for thinking of it!' And he bent down to drag aside the autumn tangle which hid the body of his victim.

As he did so, there came a sudden movement among the brambles, and Robin Hood sprang up to face his enemy, bright-eyed and grim of mouth, with his sword naked in his hand.

Before him, Sir Guy of Gisborne fell back with an oath, dragging his own blade from its scabbard. 'Wolfshead! Hedge-robber!' he cried. 'You tricked me!' And he rushed fiercely upon Robin, hatred flaming in his eyes, the horse's mane rolling and streaming out behind him in the fury of his attack.

The wood-ranger stepped lightly forward to meet him, saying scornfully: 'So you have come at last, Sir Guy of Gisborne. Many times you have sent your hedge-creeping blackguards to murder me; and now you come to see if you can succeed where they have failed! You spoke of a reckoning, Sir Guy, and a reckoning there shall be this day!'

Sir Guy made no answer save a snarl. And there, in the peace of the little green deer-path, the two old enemies came together, and the quiet forest rang with the clash and grind of blade on blade. Sir Guy had a small buckler to his defence, and Robin had none; but the evil knight was half blind with his own rage, whereas the outlaw fought with a cool head and clear judgement, and this was better than any buckler.

Back and forth they padded on lightly planted feet: smiting, guarding, lunging, each grimly bent on the death of the other, until a lucky stroke of Sir Guy's gashed the breast of Robin's tunic, and biting into the flesh beneath, drew blood above the collar-bone. Robin sprang back out of touch, and as Sir Guy rushed in with an exultant shout, stepped swiftly to one side and lunged above the guard of his enemy's sword.

Robin's blade entered cleanly over the other's black heart, and with a choking cry, Sir Guy of Gisborne dropped his sword, and staggering back, crashed to the ground.

The outlaw stood over him, breathing quickly, and looking down on his fallen foe.

'A swift death, and a cleaner one than you deserve!' said he, quietly. 'Howsoever, there you lie, Sir Guy of Gisborne. No more will you torture humble folk who have no defence against you. Slain men, and men branded and mutilated, the aching hearts of women, and little children left alone in the world—all these are avenged, Sir Guy; and so I thank the sweet Mother of Our Lord!'

He stooped, and wiping his sword on the grass to cleanse it, slid it back into its sheath. And at the same moment there came to his ears a long-drawn, high-pitched cry, so faint and far off that it all but blended away into the natural sounds of the forest. It was the outlaws' seeking-cry. Instantly he called back, and was answered.

A few minutes later the bushes parted, and out into the path stumbled the dishevelled figure of Andrew. The boy glanced wildly to left and right, saw Robin standing beside the fallen body of his enemy, and came lurching towards him.

Robin Hood saw that his youngest outlaw was the bearer of ill tidings, that he was spent with running and had cuts and scratches on his face and rents in his clothing as though he had fallen often among the undergrowth, and that his hands were bound behind him.

‘Master Robin!’ he panted. ‘Thanks be to Our Lady—I have found you! I feared I—might not come up with any of the—brotherhood, this side the Stane Ley!’

‘Steady, lad.’ Robin had drawn his hunting-knife. ‘Your hands—now, speak on.’

The cords fell away, leaving bleeding weals on the boy’s wrists; but he did not seem conscious of them, any more than he was of the strange figure of the dead man in the horse’s hide. His breast still labouring from his desperate speed, he began to pour out his tale: how, by an ill chance, he and Barnaby had fallen into the hands of Sir Roger of Doncaster; how Sir Roger had determined to use them as decoys in an attack he was launching against the outlaw band; how they had broken away from their captors when Sir Roger made camp on the Doncaster road close to Kinley Scar, and of the shooting of Barnaby, and the coming and capture of Little John.

‘And so I came with all speed to bring you the word,’ he ended.

Robin said nothing, but he set his bugle-horn to his lips and winded a strident call that tore through the forest quietness, sending out its urgent summons to any of the brotherhood who might be near enough to hear it: ‘To me! To me! and swiftly!’

Then he spoke rapidly to the young outlaw: ‘Andrew, cut through the forest to the joining of the Stane Way with the road from Doncaster. You’ll find Much and a score of the lads there; bid them join me at the Mark Oak by Wragthorne Heath, as swiftly as may be. David-the-Smith is the fleetest-footed among them; bid him take the same word to the Stane Ley, saying that Little John is in the hands of our enemies.’

Andrew started away on his errand; and for a few moments after his going, Robin remained staring frowningly before him. ‘Kinley Scar,’ said he, half under his breath. ‘That is all of seven miles from here, old fellow, and the Good Lord knows whether you are dead already, or pent within the walls of Pomfret Town!’ He bent down, and began to strip Sir Guy’s body of its strange garment. Then he took off his own tunic of faded Lincoln green, and covered the dead man with its weather-stained folds.

‘If you have the harder bed this night, Sir Guy of Gisborne, you shall have the better covering,’ said he, and turning away he took up the horse’s hide and belted it about him, pulling the hideous head forward over his own. Sir Guy’s bugle-horn he took, and his bow and clothyard shafts; but he kept his own sword. Lastly, he picked up Sir Guy’s blade from the place where it had fallen, and laid it beside the body.

And all the while he did those things he was praying, silently and ceaselessly, that he might be in time to save Little John, his sword-brother.

Hardly had he finished his preparations when Gilbert and three other members of the band came bursting through the bushes in answer to the summons of the bugle-horn. At sight of the wild figure awaiting them they came to a horrified standstill. One of them began to retreat, crossing himself fervently, and even Gilbert, who had seen foreign lands and many wonders in them, thrust out a shaking left hand with the first and second fingers crossed to ward off evil.

Robin looked at them in surprise. In his desperate anxiety for Little John, he had forgotten the effect his disguise would have on his own men, and it was a

moment before he understood; then he thrust back the fiendish hood, and said: 'It is myself, lads; there is no need to cross your fingers.'

Gilbert uttered a gasp of relief and wiped his forehead with the back of one hand as he came forward. 'Phew! Us thought Old Nick had us for sure, this time!'

'No,' said Robin, harshly, 'it is Sir Roger of Doncaster who has Little John!' In as few words as possible he told them what had happened; and he was yet speaking when two more green-clad figures came thrusting through the undergrowth, and almost in the same instant Arthur-a-Bland sprang down into the path. Three more answered the summons; then Robin pulled the horse's head forward over his face once more, and set out for Wragthorne Heath, the others following in single file.

The little party pushed swiftly northward, travelling at a steady wolf-trot that was almost a run; and as he strode ahead, Sir Guy of Gisborne's bow ready-strung in his hand, Robin was still praying in his heart that he might be in time to save Little John.

Much and his party had already reached the Mark Oak when Robin arrived with his ten followers. Small brown Much, very grim, and with his bow ready strung, came to Robin at once; and after a few brief words between them, the band pressed forward again, travelling at the same gruelling pace as before.

The Mark Oak grew on the edge of the open heath, and leaving the shelter of the trees, the wood-rangers cut straight across, plunging through a green and golden sea of waist-high bracken that parted to let them through and swayed together again behind them. When they gained the forest on the farther side, they were only a short distance from their goal. Up to this point there had been no need for silence, only for speed; but from now on they began to stalk, moving swiftly still, but silently as shadows, among the trees.

Reaching Kinley Scar, they dropped into it, and made their way down the narrow gully until, some way ahead of them, they could see the evening sunshine of open country glimmering between the tree trunks. For a short distance farther they continued; then Robin signed to them to remain where they were, and went on alone, save for Much, who came with him to act as messenger.

Right down to the woodshore Robin went, with the little brown man moving close behind him. The last few yards he drew himself forward on his stomach, until, parting the brambles and dry goats'-parsley stems, he could look out between the tangle of wild fruit-trees and see the whole sweep of the dale before him. He saw Barnaby's body lying where he had fallen, and five dead men-at-arms laid side by side at a little distance where their comrades had dragged them. He saw the Poitevins lounging beneath the elm-tree, and Sir Roger of Doncaster striding impatiently up and down, and biting his fingers as he had done on that night long ago when Marian had not come down to her wedding; and he saw also the huge figure of Little John, bound to the tree trunk, and the empty noose dangling close beside him.

'There'll be no need to break open Pomfret Town this night, Friend Much,' Robin whispered. 'Go back to the others; tell them Little John is safe as yet, and bid them make no move until I give them the word.'

Much nodded in reply and drew back into the undergrowth. In a little while he was back, as silently as he had gone, and lying beside Robin again, his small bright eyes fixed on the men-at-arms below in the dale.

The two waited patiently, watching those figures around the fire and the elm-tree. If the Poitevins made any move to hang Little John, Robin would lead his men down to the attack at once, but until the reinforcements from the Stane Ley should arrive the band was well under half strength, and there were four-score or more of the enemy. Such odds were not to be taken on lightly; so they waited, just as the men in the dale were doing.

And Robin guessed that it was Sir Guy of Gisborne's return that they awaited, before hanging their captive; and he smiled grimly to himself.

It seemed a long while before there was a faint movement in the undergrowth behind him, and Will-the-Bowman slid up to his side, whispering: 'We be here, Master.'

'Good!' Robin whispered back, and to Much: 'Do you remain here on watch, and bring me word if they make any move.'

He drew himself slowly backward, followed by Will, until well out of sight of those in the open glade, and getting to his feet went silently up the Scar to his waiting men. It took but a short while to give them their orders, to see half of them, under Will Stukely, swarm up the steep sides of the gully and disappear among the thick bushes at the top, and the remaining half standing ready at their posts just within the woodshore.

Then, standing among them, Robin set Sir Guy of Gisborne's bugle-horn to his lips and sounded the Morte, the call which hunters wind when the quarry has been slain.

In the open dale men scrambled to their feet, Sir Roger ceased his impatient prowling to and fro, and every face was turned towards the verge of the forest.

'Yon was Sir Guy of Gisborne's horn, surely,' said one man.

'Aye, and he sounds the Morte,' added another. 'That must be for a sign that he has slain Robin Hood.'

Sir Roger said nothing, but the evil joy on his face as he scanned the forest verge showed that he was of the same belief.

Little John twisted round against his bonds, and saw the strange figure in its horse's hide appear among the wild fruit-trees; and the shouted greetings of the Poitevins told him that it was Sir Guy of Gisborne. He was still hazy with loss of blood, and scarcely wondered at the evil knight's disguise. His only thought was that this was Sir Guy of Gisborne, and that Sir Guy had sounded the Morte for Robin Hood.

Robin was dead, then. Well, it was a small matter, and he, Little John, would soon be going to join him.

Down the shallow slope of the dale came Robin Hood, taking care to walk so that the sun was behind him and his face in shadow; and imitating the dead knight's voice, he cried out: 'What bird have you netted, Friend Roger? Surely it is not Little John?'

'Yes, that same rogue, and none other,' answered Sir Roger, with an ugly laugh. 'We waited for your coming before we hanged him, lest you should call us selfish dogs for keeping the pleasure to ourselves!'

‘And assuredly I would have done so!’ replied Robin. ‘I have slain the master, Sweet Roger, and now I shall give myself the pleasure of spitting upon the man!’ And taking care to keep his face still in the shadow, he strode among the men-at-arms, who parted in a rather surly manner to let him through. Only when he was very close did Little John turn his head and look into his face; and the shock of what the tall outlaw saw there cleared away the mists that had seemed to clog his brain, as a dousing of cold water clears away sleep. For an instant he grew tense as a drawn bow, and there was the merest flicker of recognition in his eyes, before he schooled his face to a look of scorn.

‘Aye, it’s myself, John,’ Robin muttered. He leaned close, as though to carry out his threat of spitting upon the captive. Little John thrust out his bound hands, and Robin’s hunting-dagger flickered twice in the shadows as he slashed first the cords about the other’s wrists and then the bonds that held him to the trunk of the elm-tree.

Between the first stroke and the second there arose a roar of fury from the men-at-arms, and Robin had only time to draw his sword and set his back to the tree trunk before they were on him from all quarters. Little John seemed to have forgotten his wounds. He laughed, short and harsh, and kicking aside his bonds, leapt upon the nearest of the attackers and wrested his sword from him, hurling him back upon his comrades so that two or three of them were brought down with a crash.

Hardly had he done so when there arose other shouts and yells from the hindmost of the mob, and in among the Poitevins came thrusting a sturdy arrowhead of men in Lincoln green, their good blades biting deep as they advanced.

For a moment the men-at-arms gave way in dismay before the sudden onslaught; then, when they realized how few were the green-clad men, they flung themselves upon them, howling for blood. The outlaw band were outnumbered nearly three to one, but they fought joyously, their darting blades seeming to have a life of their own, so swift were they, so bright and full of menace. And now, leaving the elm-tree bole which had protected their backs, Robin and Little John pressed forward into the mêlée, and fighting shoulder to shoulder, broke through to join their own men.

Instantly the outlaws began to retreat. Steadily they drew back towards the mouth of the Scar, hard-pressed by the Poitevins but still fighting with the same grim joyousness; back and back until the trees of the forest were all about them. Several of the enemy lay dead on the sunlit turf, yet three green-clad figures lay among them; and many of the outlaws were wounded, seeing which the Poitevins yelled in savage triumph, and surged after them into the shadows of the forest, all caution forgotten in their lust to kill.

But Sir Roger of Doncaster hung back on the woodshore, content to watch others wreak his revenge for him, without risking his own skin.

Fighting from tree to tree, the outlaws fell back slowly, until the sides of the gully grew steep on either hand; and as they retreated, the mercenaries pressed forward, clinging like a wolf-pack around their flanks.

Then death came humming like a flight of hornets down from the wooded sides of the Scar, and eleven of the Poitevins fell. Almost before the rest realized their danger another pitiless flight of clothyard shafts thrummed into their midst,

spreading death and confusion among them. An instant later the arrows were followed by half-a-hundred wood-rangers, who came leaping down through the trees and bushes to fling themselves upon the disordered men-at-arms.

Outmanœuvred and taken by surprise, the Poitevins turned desperately to fight their way back to open country. But not one of them ever reached it. The Englishmen hated these foreign devils too well to show them any mercy now. With every sword-thrust that found its home in an evil heart they were avenging old wrongs—and there were many wrongs to be avenged.

When it was all over, there was no sign of Sir Roger of Doncaster; for he had made his escape, leaving his henchmen to their fate. The blue twilight was rising in the little valley where men lay dead, thickly piled upon each other or sprawling singly in uncouth attitudes among the berry-laden hawthorn bushes. But beyond the mouth of the Scar the last rays of the autumn sunset lay honey-gold across the open country.

The outlaws gathered their own dead, and scooping out a wide, shallow grave in the soft ground of the woodshore, laid them there, side by side, each man with his bow beside him, and turned the green sods back over them.

The blue dusk had deepened almost to night before all was done; and Robin and Little John stood together in the mouth of the Scar, while the rest of the outlaws were making ready for the long homeward march.

‘The last time we tried that trick, it was nigh on thirty years ago,’ said Robin, ‘and Will-the-Bowman was the captive to be rescued.’

Little John smiled grimly. ‘It’s a good trick, though not one to be too often repeated.’

‘Why, that can be said of most tricks; it is always as well to give people time to forget—before trying them again.’

‘This day’s work will not be forgotten in a hurry, when once it comes to be known.’

‘No,’ said Robin, after a moment’s pause. ‘It has been a good day’s work, for though Roger of Doncaster has saved his cowardly skin, the countryside will sleep the quieter at nights because his evil horde are no more. A good day’s work, John, but a costly one for us.’

‘Seven men we have lost,’ replied the other. ‘God rest their brave souls.’

For a little while Robin stood silent. He hated to lose any of his men, and Barnaby was the last of the four farm-lads who had come with him to the Greenwood on that far-off day when Trusty had been slain.

Then he turned away and went to join the rest of his band, saying cheerily: ‘That was a good fight, lads, and the world will be a sweeter place now that yonder Poitevin devils are out of it!’

The outlaws had chosen to make the long march back to the Stane Ley that night, rather than camp until morning, since they had with them neither food nor the means of attending properly to the wounded; and so, before the moon had risen high enough to shine down upon the dead men in Kinley Scar, Robin Hood and his band were well on their homeward way.

And Sir Roger of Doncaster went south towards his own manor at breakneck speed, mouthing curses to himself at every step and biting at his fingers until they bled. ‘Plague and pestilence upon that Robin of Barnesdale! Mortal man cannot stand against him. He is surely a devil! A devil!’ cried Sir Roger, and

shook his bitten fist at the rising moon.

How Robin of Barnesdale loosed his last Arrow

NEVER AGAIN DID Sir Roger of Doncaster make any attack on Robin Hood in his own forest. But he did not give up hope of his revenge; indeed he hugged it to him closer and closer as the years went by, brooding over it until he could think of nothing else.

As he sat in his gloomy manor house, word came to him from time to time of Robin and his outlaw band: word of some daring rescue, tidings of justice done upon a tyrannical overlord, or a pitched battle between the outlaws and some raiding party of the king's army. So Sir Roger heard how the wood-rangers had taught young Squire Stephen of Thurgoland to mend his ill treatment of his mother; how they had rescued three young brothers from under the very nose of the Sheriff of Nottingham; and how they had fought a little war against the mossmen who came reaving over the Border, and had driven the proud Douglasses and Armstrongs back into Scotland; and he heard also the tale which had set all the forest country laughing: of how Robin had waylaid His Grace the Bishop of Hereford and forced him to dance without his boots.

These tidings of his enemy drove Sir Roger of Doncaster almost crazy with malice, yet he must always be listening for more; for now, whether he sat at meat in his gloomy hall or rode hawking in his chase, he could think of nothing but Robin Hood and his longing to be revenged upon him.

One day news came to Sir Roger, brought by a trembling villein in hope of favour, that the outlaw chief had been wounded in the thigh while fighting against the marauding Scots of Westmorland, and was direly sick of the wound. Sir Roger rewarded the man with a gold noble; and that night he sat late over his wine, staring in front of him down his long hall, with an evil joy on his face as he thought of his enemy's plight, or biting his fingers when he bethought him that after all the tidings might be false.

But the tidings were not false. Robin lay in his summer quarters at the Stane Ley, with a great wound in his thigh; and for a little while he seemed very likely to die, for all Little John's tender nursing.

The wound healed at last, but from that time forward all was not well with Robin of Barnesdale. For months at a time he would be well and strong as ever, but there were times when the old scar grew angry and inflamed, and fever ran hot in his veins. Sometimes the sickness would be slight and pass swiftly under Little John's rough yet skilful doctoring; but at others it would last for many days, and rather than burden his band with a sick man to care for, Robin would betake himself to Kirklees Nunnery, where his cousin Ursula was now the abbess. She was skilled in herb-lore and medicine, and would bleed him and give him cool herbal brews to quell his fever, and spread soothing salves on the

old, aching scar; and in a day or two the outlaw chief would be whole again, and go back to his waiting men in the Greenwood.

All this was known to Sir Roger of Doncaster, and inside his cunning brain an evil plan began to grow.

One day in early summer he paid a visit to the Abbess of Kirklees Nunnery. A fair and gracious place was the nunnery, set in a wide bow of Sherwood Forest, amid quiet fields where the wheat was tall and green and hay-harvest had not yet begun. The steward's house, with its shingle roof, and the bracken-thatched hovels of the farm villeins clustered not far from the grey walls of the nunnery, each with its little bean-patch and herb-plot, and a little way off the fish-pond reflected the sky silverly between the pollard willows which ringed it round.

Sir Roger rode down into the shallow dale, and handing his horse over to the care of a villein made his way to a small, strong door set deep in the wall of the nunnery garden. He beat with the pommel of his sword upon the door-timbers, and a stout portress came in answer to his summons, who after inspecting him through a grill gave him entrance and led him up through the roses, sweet-rocket and clove carnations to the door of the hall.

In a narrow, white-walled chamber smelling of bees-wax, he spoke with Abbess Ursula as she stood beside the window. She was a tall old woman, with a smooth pale face long schooled to wear a saintly expression, yet her eyes had the cold, shallow glitter of glass, and her hands, which moved ceaselessly over the beads of her rosary, were cruel and greedy as the talons of a bird of prey, for all that they were so soft and white.

They had exchanged formal greetings, Sir Roger had apologized for intruding upon her, and now he began to speak politely of the richness of the nunnery lands.

The abbess listened to him courteously, then said she: 'The lands of Kirklees are famed for their richness, as our garden is farmed for its herbs—and indeed it is just as well that it should be so, for we have barely enough land for the upkeep of so large a religious house.'

'Should you not like to add to the nunnery lands, then, Holy Mother?' asked Sir Roger, and then added slowly: 'I have thirty acres of good corn-land not above three miles from here, and possibly I might be able to spare them.'

The Abbess Ursula made no reply, but she looked at him closely, and waited for him to go on.

'Should you not like to add thirty acres of corn-land to the nunnery estates?'

'Oh my son,' replied the abbess in a pious voice; 'the blessings of the Saints be upon you for the gift!'

Sir Roger shook his head with an evil smile. 'It is no gift for the good of my soul that I offer, Holy Mother, but payment for a certain service.'

'A certain service?' asked the abbess softly. 'And what might that be?'

The old knight bent his head and continued: 'I have heard it said that a certain cousin of yours comes here at times, to be physicked for an ancient wound that troubles him.'

'That is so.'

'And it is likely that he will come again?'

'It is certain,' replied Abbess Ursula. 'For no one else can heal him as surely as I can, since no one else has my knowledge of herbs.'

‘Doubtless you have often bled him also,’ said Sir Roger, hurriedly. ‘Blood-letting is the best way of cooling a fever, as I have heard; and I have heard also that it is sometimes easy for *too much blood to flow, and the patient die.*’ As he spoke, he glanced over his shoulder, as though afraid someone might have overheard him.

The abbess ceased fingering her beads, turned from the window with a slow swirl of her black habit, and came close to her visitor. ‘Thirty acres of corn-land for the death of your enemy?’ said she.

Sir Roger drew back from her, crossing himself. His pale face had grown livid. ‘I did not say it!’

‘No, you did not *say* it,’ said the abbess contemptuously. ‘You have not the courage to order the murder of your enemy in so many words, lest the walls should overhear you! The walls have no ears, man, and they are too thick for anyone outside to overhear anything which passes in this room!’

The old knight licked his dry lips and summoned up a smile. ‘Ah, now, Holy Mother, you are too hard upon me. It is as well to be careful in these matters. But—is it a bargain?’

‘A pair of golden candlesticks would look well before St. Catherine’s shrine in our little chapel,’ replied the Abbess Ursula, watching him with a greedy light in her eyes. ‘Add them to the corn-land, for the good of your soul, and it is a bargain.’

‘And a mighty hard one. Holy Mother! I am not a rich man!’ protested Sir Roger.

‘That is nothing to me. If the death of Robin Hood is worth thirty acres of corn-land *and* a pair of golden candlesticks to you, you have only to say so. If not, you can find some other hand to commit your murder for you!’

For a few moments Sir Roger of Doncaster was silent, staring at the floor and biting his fingers. Then he said: ‘Very well—the land and the candlesticks together.’ But within himself he added: ‘And may your soul rot for this, you bargain-driving old shrew!’

The abbess smiled a slow and pious smile, but her eyes glittered beneath her lids. ‘Come whenever you will to ask for news; for I shall send you no messenger when your orders have been carried out, lest he be stopped by Robin’s men and suspicion fall upon this house.’

She took up a little silver bell from the table beside her, and rang it. A novice came in answer to her summons, and was bidden to show the visitor to the gate; and after following her black figure down long passages and being given into the charge of the portress, Sir Roger of Doncaster found himself once again outside the walls of Kirklees Nunnery.

On the whole he was well pleased with his visit as he rode home. The abbess had driven a hard bargain, but he knew in his heart of hearts that he would have paid away almost all that he possessed to bring about the death of the man he hated so bitterly.

Autumn in the Greenwood. Late autumn, and the last brown leaves whirling down in the wind. High overhead the sky was milky blue, and the bare branches of the trees danced against it to the hoarse music of the gale. The whole forest seemed to be dancing—dancing away the last of summer before it turned to the

long, cold frost-time of winter that lay ahead. It was such a day as Robin had ever loved, and of old he would have been out in the hurly-burly of it—out after the red deer perhaps, with his bow in hand, or striding through the forest with no particular end in view; one excuse was as good as another when the wind was full of whirling leaves and the bare branches whipped across the sky and wintry sunshine scudded through the forest.

But this day Robin lay propped on one elbow beside the fire in the Long Cave, and his eyes were over-bright and his cheeks flushed with fever.

Robin of Barnesdale was growing old: his crisp dark hair had become brindled grey like a badger's coat, and the bones stood out too sharply beneath the brown skin of jaw and temple; but his lean body had altered little since first he came to the Greenwood, and save for his hair, and the fine network of lines which age and rough weather and much gazing into the distance had set about his eyes, he still seemed like a young man.

As he gazed into the licking flame-tongues of the fire, his face was set and hard with pain; and presently he shifted uneasily, to comfort the throbbing of the old wound which was troubling him again.

A huge shadow darkened the opening of the cave, and Little John came in, shaking the shrivelled leaves from his hood, and squatted down at Robin's side.

'Is it any easier, Robin?' asked he.

'No, John. I am hot and cold at once, and there is a fire in the old wound. It is best that I should go to Kirklees Nunnery to-day and ask my cousin Ursula to bleed and physic me, and make me whole again.'

There was fear in Little John's eyes and in his voice as he answered: 'Robin, dear old lad—do not go to Kirklees, for I have heard it said that Roger of Doncaster has been there very often in these last few months, and I feel in my bones that his visits bode no good to you. Stay here with us, and the sickness will pass as it has done before.'

But Robin only laughed. 'Roger of Doncaster is an old man, and I have no doubt that he visits Kirklees for much the same reason as I do myself,' said he. 'And what possible harm could come to me in the nunnery? Is not the Lady Ursula my kinswoman? Go and saddle my horse, old friend, for the sooner we start out the sooner I shall be whole again.'

Little John got up slowly. 'Forty years and more, you and I have been together,' he said. 'And well I know that there is nothing on this earth that will turn you from your purpose once your wilful heart is set upon it. But I tell you this, Robin of Barnesdale—if you go to Kirklees to-day, there be four-score men of the Greenwood who are coming with you!'

'They shall come as far as the edge of the forest,' re-joined Robin, 'and you shall leave me at the nunnery gate, John. Now go and saddle my horse.'

And with that Little John had to be content, as he made his way to the turf-roofed stables.

So in a little while the band set out, Robin riding a placid grey palfrey, for he was too weak and ill to handle the fiery hunter he usually rode, with Little John walking at his stirrup, and the rest of the wood-rangers following behind.

It was noon when they reached the place where Sherwood Forest washed against the rich farm-land of Kirklees Nunnery; and here Robin bade his men to wait, and rode forward with only Little John. The wind had quite died away

since early morning, and it seemed very quiet in the peaceful dale as they made their way down to the grey huddle of the nunnery buildings. Before Robin dismounted at the gate, Little John made one last desperate appeal to him to change his mind. 'Robin, come back with me now, for there is a shadow over this place, and it bodes ill for you!'

'John, John,' replied Robin, 'you are as full of cluckings as a hen with only one chicken and that a duckling! If any harm should threaten me in the nunnery, I will wind my bugle-horn, as I have done often before when I had need of you. Now help me down, for I am weak, and the world swims about me.'

So Little John aided him to dismount, and steadied him with a strong arm when he reached the ground. The outlaw chief turned towards the heavy door in the wall, and beat upon it, though feebly, with his clenched fist.

In a little while they heard shuffling footsteps within; the face of the portress appeared behind the grill, and seeing who it was that claimed admittance, she swiftly drew the bolts and set the door wide. Robin took his hand from his tall lieutenant's arm, saying: 'Get back with the others to Dunwold Scar, John, and do not trouble your head with gloomy imaginings. I shall be back among you in three days' time.'

The two friends struck hands, and then Robin followed the portress into the nunnery garden, and the heavy door swung to behind him.

Little John stood where he was until he heard the bolts being shot, and footsteps going away from him on the farther side; then, taking the grey palfrey's bridle, he turned and trudged away with a heavy heart, back towards the woodshore where his comrades were awaiting him.

Robin followed the portress, walking slowly and unsteadily, for the stone-flagged path seemed to sway beneath his feet.

It was almost winter outside, but here in the nunnery garden, sheltered from frost and wind by the high walls, summer yet seemed to linger. There were a few scentless blossoms upon the rose-bushes, and the mignonette was still in flower. It seemed a long time to Robin before he reached the open door of the hall, and the abbess herself came down to greet him and bid him welcome.

'Well, Cousin Ursula,' said Robin, doffing his cap, 'I am come to trouble you again, you see.'

Very pious and sweetly smiling was the abbess. 'It is no trouble, Robin, no trouble in the world,' said she. 'Indeed, as one grows older, one becomes lonely, and it is a pleasant thing to see a kinsman's face.' And she gave him her arm to aid him up the steep circular stairway that led from the great hall to the sleeping-quarters above.

Down one corridor she led him, and up another, and so brought him to a part of the nunnery far removed from the living-quarters, to a small, white-walled chamber with sweet strewing-rushes on the floor. An ancient chest with grinning gargoyle heads carved upon it stood in one corner, and against the farther wall was a narrow bed spread with a sheepskin rug, which looked very inviting to the sick man.

Robin laid his cap down upon the chest, and slipping his bowstave from his shoulders, propped it in the corner with his quiver beside it; and while he was doing these things, the Abbess Ursula brought salves and clean linen, and a fine brazen bowl which she set upon the floor beside the bed. When all was in

readiness, Robin loosed the points of his stocking and drew it down, that she might come at the angry scar; then he lay down upon the bed with a sigh of relief.

The abbess dressed the old scar with a strong-smelling brown salve which felt wonderfully cool and soothing, and covered it with bandages of linen. Then Robin pulled up the loose sleeve of his tunic, and that of his shirt beneath, and held out his thin brown arm, for her to bleed him.

Abbess Ursula drew a small, sharp knife from the pouch hanging at her girdle, and taking Robin's hand, she turned it palm upwards, and cut deep into the thick blue vein at his wrist. The blood welled up slowly, and she set the brazen bowl to catch the drops as they fell. Then she went quickly from the room, and returned in a few moments, carrying a silver cup. She set her arm beneath Robin's head, and raised him gently. 'Drink this,' said she, 'it will cool your fever. I will sit here in the window until it is time to tie up the blood-flow.'

Robin drank the brew, which tasted bitter and smelled strongly of herbs; and he lay back with a sigh, saying: 'Thanks, Cousin Ursula. You are very kind to your lawless kinsman.'

She turned away without a word, setting the cup down on the gargoyle-carved chest, and went to sit in the broad window-embrasure.

Robin lay very still, gazing drowsily at the wintry sunshine that splashed down through the window, making the thick glass of the panes as clearly green as the leaves of his own dear lime-tree when the sun shone through them in the springtime. And sleep came upon him very gently, as the drug which had been in the cup began to work; slowly his eyes closed, and he drifted out into a dark sea of drugged sleep.

The abbess sat very quiet and watchful in the window embrasure, listening to Robin's breathing until it grew deep and regular. Then she rose, and, crossing to the bed, stood for a moment looking down at the sleeping man before she went to the door and, opening it, beckoned to someone in the corridor outside.

Sir Roger of Doncaster came furtively into the chamber, and she pointed to the bed. 'There he lies. It was a happy chance that brought you to Kirklees Hall this morning!'

The old knight stood looking down at his victim, and his face was twisted into a hideous, gloating pleasure. 'When will he die?' he asked softly.

'If the blood continues to flow freely, he will be dead by nightfall,' answered the abbess. She looked aside at Sir Roger, and suggested: 'Why wait until then? Why not take your dagger and end it, now?'

But Sir Roger shook his head and began to draw back towards the door. 'No—no, not I!' he muttered.

The abbess laughed scornfully, and as Robin, disturbed by her laughter, stirred uneasily in his drugged sleep, she moved swiftly and silently from the room, sweeping Sir Roger with her. She closed the door, and locked it with a heavy key from a bunch which hung at her girdle. Then she set her back against the door and stood looking at the evil old knight. 'Had you been even half a man, you would have let his life out yourself, instead of leaving it to drain away into a basin!' said she, contemptuously.

She began to walk away down the corridor, the skirts of her black habit sweeping over the floor; then she looked back over her shoulder, saying: 'You

had best come to my room and drink a cup of wine to give you courage, for we shall have a long wait.'

The two of them made their way up one stone-flagged passage and down another, the black abbess gliding before, the knight slinking behind; and descending the circular stairway, they came to the chamber where they had made their evil bargain, half a year ago.

Left alone in that wing of the nunnery, Robin slept on. The wintry sunshine stole farther and farther round the whitewashed walls of the little chamber, and the outlaw's scarlet life-blood drained drop by drop into the bowl which had been set to receive it. The abbess had meant him to die in his sleep, but she had not mixed the drug strong enough, and towards evening he awoke. His fever had gone from him, but so, too, had almost all his life. He had ceased to bleed, but only because there was so little blood left in his body. Dragging himself up on to one elbow, he stared about him; but he saw no sign of the abbess, and then he knew that he had been left to die.

Slipping from the bed, he stood swaying dizzily on his feet, then, supporting himself against the wall, he dragged himself to the door. It did not yield to his hand; he had not really expected that it would, for he had known in his heart that it would be locked on the outside. He turned away, and with a terrible effort, gained the window, collapsing against the sill; then, painfully dragging himself upright, he looked out. The window was too high for him to drop to the ground.

He was trapped! Trapped like a curlew in a fowler's net. Not that it made any great difference now, for he was dying, and he knew it.

Close beside him his bugle-horn hung from the foot of the bed; and he took it up, and setting it to his lips, winded the old rallying-call. The blast was very weak, though it had cost him all the strength that was left to him, and he wondered, dreamily, whether Little John would hear it, even if he had disobeyed his orders to go back to Dunwold Scar and was still near at hand. Then the room went black about him and there was a great buzzing in his ears, and he pitched down half across the bed, and the darkness closed over him.

Little John had not led the outlaws back to Dunwold Scar. He had sat all afternoon on the woodshore, with his hands locked around his updrawn knees, gazing down at the grey huddle of buildings that was Kirklees Nunnery, and waiting for he knew not what; only he was sure that some danger threatened Robin, and his heart within him was sick with dread.

The other men were anxious and ill-at-ease also, though not so anxious as Little John, and as they sat or sprawled among the first trees of the forest, they turned often to look down at the nunnery in the valley.

Slowly the afternoon wore away. There was a bitter smell of frost in the air, and the sun, like a rose-red lantern, was sinking low towards the western ramparts of the Peak district, when at last there came to the ears of the waiting outlaws the sound of Robin's bugle-horn.

The old familiar summons sounded faintly—so very faintly—across the frosty fields; and Little John was afoot on the instant, and running for Kirklees as he had never run before. The others raced at his heels; not a word had been spoken, but each knew that some terrible harm must have come to Robin, that he winded so feeble a blast. They were young men, some of them stripling youths, and

Little John was old, yet there was none among them who could outrun him that day, as he raced across the frosty field-strips, drawing his sword as he ran.

He reached that small strong door in the wall, and not waiting to summon the portress, hurled himself against the stout timbers. Others followed him; strong shoulders and hedge-cudgels soon battered it in, and the outlaw band poured through, to hurl themselves in turn against the door of the house itself. It gave way, as the other had done, the groaning of its rending timbers mingled with a great screaming and praying from within; and Little John strode into the hall of Kirklees Nunnery, with his sword in his hand and four-score grim-faced wood-rangers at his back.

Very white and grim was Little John, as he rounded upon the huddle of pale-faced nuns confronting him.

‘Where is Robin Hood?’ he demanded. ‘Where is the abbess?’

No one knew. The portress had admitted Robin Hood; no one else had seen him—except the abbess, and the abbess had fled.

Little John turned from the frightened nuns and spoke quickly to his men. ‘Search the house, lads.’ Instantly the band split up; green-clad figures sped to the various doors that opened upon the hall, while others followed at Little John’s heels as he stormed up the narrow stairway. They flowed like a green sea down the corridors of the sleeping-quarters, questing into room after room in search of their master.

It was Little John who came first upon the locked door, and withdrawing to the farther side of the corridor, he flung himself against it, battering it open with his shoulder. Much and Gilbert were close behind him as he rushed into the chamber.

What a sight met their eyes! Robin Hood lay half across the bed where he had fallen in his swoon, white and bloodless and seemingly dead, and on the floor beside him a deep brazen vessel brimmed over with blood!

Little John spoke no word, but he crossed to the bed, and dropping on his knees beside it, felt for Robin’s heart. It scarcely beat at all under his fingers, but next moment Robin opened his eyes slowly, and smiled. ‘So you—heard the summons, then, John?’

‘Yes,’ said Little John, ‘I heard the summons.’ Then, between shut teeth: ‘Kirklees Nunnery shall burn for this day’s work!’

Robin shook his head weakly. ‘Little John, I never harmed any woman in my life, and it shall not be done in my name after my death. But now—I have only a little while left. Gilbert, bring me my bow from—the corner yonder, and string it for me—and open the window.’

The chamber was full of men now, and the corridor was full beyond, for word had gone round that the search was ended; two of them tore open the casement. It was Much who brought Robin’s quiver, while Gilbert strung the great bow that would never be strung again.

‘Now,’ said Robin. ‘Help me up, John, and hold me while I shoot; and where the arrow falls, that is where you shall bury me.’

Very gently Little John aided him to rise and gain the window. Gilbert gave him his bow, and Much came forward, the tears rolling down his leathery cheeks, to put an arrow into Robin’s outstretched hand.

For a few moments the dying outlaw stood looking away over the walls of the nunnery garden, over the meadows lying quiet in the sunset light, to the dark verge of the forest beyond. And it seemed to him that the evening was the fairest he had ever seen, and the forest was calling him home. Then he nocked the arrow to his string. He was so weak that he could scarcely bend the great bow halfway, but his loose was as smooth and true as ever. The arrow soared out through the window—the last arrow that Robin of Barnesdale would ever loose—and the released bow-string sang its familiar song close to his ear. A low sob broke from one of the brotherhood, and many eyes were dimmed with tears as they watched the shaft speeding out over the meadows.

It ended its flight, striking the ground close beside a tiny path that led across the pastures, just where farmland and forest came together; and as it landed, Robin gave a sigh, and fell back into Little John's arms. They lowered him gently upon the bed, and he lay still, with his hand in Little John's.

'Dig my grave broad and long, that I may lie easy,' he whispered. 'And set a green sod beneath my head and another at my feet, for I—have always loved best to sleep—upon the free turf of the—Greenwood, and I would sleep upon it—at the last. And lay my bow beside me. It has been a faithful friend these—many years.'

He looked about him at the outlaws who stood around his bed, and summoned up a faint smile. 'Never wear such woeful faces on my account, lads; but be glad of the good days that we have shared together!'

For a while he lay in silence, gazing at the window, with a wide, blue look of peace in his eyes. At last he stirred, and spoke again to Little John, in a whisper so faint that only those nearest to him could hear what he said:

'Raise me up, old lad—your arm under my head—so. Now kiss me, John—and—good-bye.'

Little John was dry-eyed as he bent his head and kissed the forehead of his sword-brother. He would have wept had he been able to, but it was as though his heart were dried up and turned to stone within him.

Robin drew a long, quivering breath, and with its outgoing his gallant spirit went free as the winds of the Greenwood.

Little John laid him down, and got slowly to his feet. A great stillness had fallen over the men who stood with bared heads around their leader's body. So quiet was the chamber that those within it could hear the sad, sweet autumn-song of a robin at the farther end of the nunnery garden.

The outlaws would not suffer the body of their leader to lie within Kirklees hall that night. Little John it was who, with his great strength, carried him down the narrow stairway and out of the accursed house into the free wholesomeness of the meadows. They bore him far into the forest that had been his kingdom, and laying him down at the head of a broad ride, where often he had lain to watch the sunshine splashing through the chestnut-trees, watched beside him all night, while one of their number sped northward through the forest towards Fountains Dale, to fetch Friar Tuck.

It was towards evening on the second day when the Curtel Friar came out of the forest; and he was old and grey, his great shoulders bowed with the weight of the years that had passed over him, and his face haggard with sorrow at the cause of his coming.

Then the outlaws laid the body of Robin Hood very gently in the grave that they had dug for him where the arrow fell—a broad, long grave, as he had asked—and they set a green sod beneath his head and another at his feet, and laid his great red-yew bow ready-strung beside him.

The crimson sun was sinking low behind the western hills as the outlaws stood with bowed heads around the open grave while Friar Tuck read the burial service. The red sunset light flowed across the meadows, sending long shafts of warmth and radiance to strike deep into the forest, and flushing the boles of the trees with pink. Friar Tuck's deep voice fell silent, and he closed his book. Then they filled in Robin's grave and laid the sods back lightly over it.

Long after the rest had gone in silence back towards Dunwold Scar, long after the red warmth of sunset had died out among the trees, Little John remained alone in the slate-grey November twilight, standing with bent head beside the grave. Then he, too, turned and stole away into the forest, where it was already night.

Sir Roger had left Kirklees with the abbess by a secret way. He fled to Grimsby, with Much, Will Stukely, and Little John hard upon his heels, and narrowly escaped them by taking ship for France, where he returned to his own estates, keeping himself closely guarded against the just vengeance which he knew to be hard behind him. For a while he lived on miserably, in hourly fear for his life; and then the vengeance that he had feared caught up with him.

Strangely, it was not Little John, nor Much, nor Gilbert-of-the-White-Hand who avenged Robin's death on the man who had caused him to be slain. It was a certain strolling juggler, a little, wizened old man like a dressed-up monkey in his parti-coloured rags of red and yellow, who juggled wonderfully with gaily coloured balls and fresh-cut flowers and little gleaming daggers. They were so bright and pretty, those daggers, that they seemed more like playthings than weapons; but one of them was sharp enough to slip deep into Sir Roger's black heart as he sat in his castle garden; and afterwards the little juggler escaped, and was no more seen.

It was so long since Peterkin had been one of Robin Hood's men that the others of the original band had all but forgotten him; but Peterkin had not forgotten.

After the death of Robin of Barnesdale it was not long before the brotherhood split up. Some of them went to distant towns and far-off dales, hired themselves to new masters, and settled down into law-abiding citizens. Gilbert travelled north, and became a famous fighter against the Scots; several of the younger ones went south, to join the King's Archers. Some made their way to Alan A'Dale, who now held the Castle of Linden Lea, old Sir Richard being long since dead, and he settled them on his land.

Much and Little John would have been welcome at Linden Lea also, but they had no wish to take service with another master, even if that master was Alan A'Dale. They had enough money between them to buy a little farm in the wilds of Werrisdale, and there they went together and settled down.

The shadows of the budding trees danced over Robin's grave in the winds of springtime, and the golden leaves drifted down and covered it in the autumn. Once again grass grew over the fire-scars in the Stane Ley, and no one sat

between the spreading roots of the giant Trysting Lime. It was as though Robin Hood and his men had never roamed the glades of Barnesdale and Sherwood. Yet they lived on in the hearts of the people; and indeed they still do, even to this very day, because they stood for freedom and justice and kindness, and all those things which are dear to the English people.

About the Author

Rosemary Sutcliff was born in 1920 in West Clanden, Surrey.

With over 40 books to her credit, Rosemary Sutcliff is now universally considered one of the finest writers of historical novels for children. Her first novel, *The Queen Elizabeth Story* was published in 1950. In 1959 her book, *The Lantern Bearers* won the Carnegie Medal. In 1974 she was highly commended for the Hans Christian Andersen Award and in 1978 her book, *Song for a Dark Queen* was commended for the Other Award.

In 1975, Rosemary was awarded the OBE for services to Children's Literature and the CBE in 1992. Unfortunately Rosemary passed away in July 1992 and will be much missed by her many fans.

Also by Rosemary Sutcliff

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